

Madison Christian Community

1967-2003

Gifted Land



Carl Meyer

Sharon & Sandra Dauck and Helen & Billy Shields (friends)

"THIS GIFTED LAND"

We begin with the land because the land was here, as a gift from a bountiful Creator, before the first human eyes gazed on its beauty and the first human feet walked on the soft earth that surrounds us in this holy place. When I stand at the beginning of the Labyrinth path behind our church, I sometimes feel like I can sense the presence of those men, women, and children who first passed this way. I picture them kneeling down and placing their hands reverently on the soft, warm earth. I sometimes feel like I can hear echoes of their prayers:

"You are Mother Earth...the only Mother we all share. You have shown mercy on us your children. Hear me, a relative of all that lives, give me strength to walk gently on the soft earth....Give me eyes to see it's beauty, give me wisdom to receive it's bounty with gratitude and humility. Look upon the faces of your children that we may walk the good road with a quiet and loving heart."

As most of you know, when our sanctuary was built, the excavated earth was formed into a prairie berm in the shape of a bird to remind us of our kinship with the earth and also to remind us of those who first called this land a sacred gift. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons, why, beginning with Dan Schmiechen, every year we take our youth out into the wilderness on a kind of vision quest to help them to experience personally the sacred giftedness of creation.

We are here today because others did follow those first inhabitants of this land. They came with their own histories of struggle and hardship, but they came also with a dream. A dream that, with hard work and careful stewardship of the land, they could carve out a good life for themselves and their children, and their children's children after them. Among the tide of German immigrants that came to this area in the late 1800's were Karl and Anna Meyer. They were able in time to purchase the land that surrounds us and here they began their family. Karl's sister Rosetta later married a hardworking, ambitious, young man by the name of Herman Dauck. The young couple moved to Old Sauk Road across the road from Anna and Karl. When Karl died, Herman farmed the land with his mother-in-law. By then, Herman and Rosetta were raising a family of their own.

Gilman was born first and seven years later, Herman Dauck saw the light of day. Yes, this is the same Herman Dauck we are pleased to welcome to our church this morning. The Herman Dauck who with his Brother Gilman, would one day be responsible for the gift of the land on which our church rests.

Today it's hard for us to imagine what life was like for them. This whole west side of Madison, as far as the eye could see, was open farm land. The days were long and the work hard, much of it done by hand. The Daucks' raised dairy cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens, even ducks and geese. Life was not easy, but life was good. Gilman and Herman worked side by side with their father, sharing in the work and the produce that flowed from their farms. There were challenges. The year after Gilman and Dorothy were married the barn burned down. But neighbors came and helped put up a new barn. The new barn was 32feet by 70feet and cost the princely sum of \$3500. The real gift for them was not just the new barn but also the experience of being a part of a caring community.

The work was done first, but there were always times for play as well. Before the days of television, the entertainment was really created whenever friends and neighbors could find time to be together. Herman remembers card parties, bingo, and dances held in each other homes. Music was provided by accordions, guitars and sometimes a fiddle. It sounds like my kind of fun! Pastor Olson at St; Luke's, in a rash moment, even gave his permission for the young people at the church to have a square dance. Talk about playing with fire! I like to think of this gifted land being baptized not only by sweat and tears but also by music and laughter!

I think the biggest changes in the lives of Dauck brothers came when Anna Meyer decided to play match-maker. She succeeded in introducing Gimp to a beautiful young woman from Marxville by the name of Dorothy. Gilman and Dorothy would raise two daughters, Sharon and Sandy and a son by the name of Greg on this land. It was through a double date that Dorothy's sister Doris would creep into Herman's heart and life. Two daughters, Nancy and Betty, came to brighten their lives. All of these children seemed to really thrive in this place and

were fully involved in the work and life of the farms. Clearly, the two sisters Dorothy and Doris brought a rich dowry of compassion, courage and faith to the families of the two brothers. Unfortunately, Doris died at the tender age of 41. Dorothy speaks gratefully of the loving comfort they received at that time from their newly arrived pastor at St. Luke's, Jim Ohlrogge. In 1995 Herman was married to Betty, a city girl from Pennsylvania he met at St. Luke's. We're pleased to also welcome her to Madison Christian Community this morning.

Visiting with Herman and Dorothy, it becomes clear that along with work and family, the other important reality in their lives was their community of faith. Attending worship and Sunday School, and later youth activities, were taken for granted as a natural part of their lives. As adults they continued to be actively involved in their community of faith. When the time came for the two brothers to consider retiring from farming, and the opportunity arose to sell their farms, it seemed to them only reasonable to set aside a tract of land as a gift, a gift to enable a church to be established in the midst of the new housing development that was being planned at that time.

In fact, almost ten years would pass by before a single spade of dirt would be turned. Some of the land lay fallow waiting for a dream to be fulfilled, but some of it, even back then, became community gardens for people in the neighborhood. During this time and on into the first years of MCC, Herman lived down the road from the church and many here remember going after church to buy wonderful, fresh, country eggs from Herman. He operated on the honor system. You took your eggs and left your money. Strangely enough, in spite of what we know about human nature, this system seemed to work!

What the Daucks' may not have realized at the time they offered this generous gift of the land was that, for Advent Lutheran, this gift was a true miracle sent from heaven! Advent was a small, struggling congregation down on the corner of Eau Claire and Sheboygan. They had begun with high hopes, but soon found themselves trapped in a location that seemed to limit their prospects for growth and, more important, their opportunities for mission. At the time, they were more than \$130,000 in debt, which seems today like a small burden, but for Advent it seemed gigantic!

They had not been able to even make their interest payments on the debt, to say nothing of paying on the principle. George Diel tells me there were Sundays when the total offering was less than \$100!

There were times when they were afraid to turn on the heat because they didn't have money to pay their fuel bill. But more serious than the lack of money was the fact that the morale of the congregation was deteriorating, a spirit of contention was growing and families were beginning to leave. The scriptures tell us, "where there is no vision, the people perish!" There were wonderful people in the congregation, and devoted leadership, but it was very difficult under these circumstances to develop a sense of where God was leading them. It is no exaggeration to say, "Advent needed a-miracle!" And in God's provision of abundance, not one, but at least three miracles came in answer to the prayers of pastor and people!

The first miracle was the birth of a dream. A dream taking gradual shape in the mind and heart of Pastor Ray Lester and some of the leaders of the congregation. In the midst of this difficult time, they began to ask some visionary questions, "If we were not here in this location, and could begin again in another place, what kind of a congregation might God be calling us to become?" We need remember, this was a time when the spirit of ecumenism was gathering strength. "What if we could create a unique community of faith in which Christians of various denominations would share a facility and present a united witness to the community?" "It would be a unique parish that would be able to reach out and touch the lives of people who might not otherwise be attracted to the Christian faith?" It was an exciting thought, but it seemed likely, under the circumstances, it would never be more than just a dream.

Then came a second miracle; it was the offer from a real estate developer to buy the existing building and land for \$250,000. This was enough money to wipe out the debt and enable Advent to emerge with a small nest egg of \$90,000 to begin again somewhere else. The leadership began to look more seriously at the possibilities. A delegation even went out to California to visit a store-front church they had heard about. They wanted to be imaginative and to look at every

possible model for mission. Now the question was asked in earnest, "Would any other churches be interested in joining with Advent in fulfilling that dream of a unique ecumenical community of faith?" Let's find out! Invitations were sent out. Who knows if anyone will come? Well, God knows, but who knows what God has in his or her mind?

At the first meeting called, representatives of twenty five different parishes and denominations were present! It seemed at the time to be a very promising beginning, but when the time came to become serious about the dream, one by one the other churches dropped out. As the old spiritual puts it, "Everybody talking about heaven, ain't going there!" Everyone except the United Church of Christ, which was interested in starting a mission church to minister to people on the west side of Madison. This new congregation was to be called "Community of Hope". What a wonderful act of faith to name a congregation, which has no tangible resources and does not yet exist, "Community of Hope!" To make a long story short, the two congregations sort of proposed to each other and got married. Fortunately for us, it turned out to be a marriage that would stand the test of time! A pastor by the name of Dan Schmiechen was called to serve this new UCC mission. He would provide invaluable leadership during the first years of this dream church.

The third miracle was the miracle we already hinted at. At this very critical time, Herman Dauck and his brother Gilman came forward with an offer to donate five acres of land in a prime west side location, as a site for a church!. The land was a part of the farms that had been home to them and their children. The gift of the land was gratefully accepted and some months later a church began to be built on this holy, gifted land. The rest, as they say, is history.

I don't mean to imply by that statement that the struggles were over for this dream church. Far from it! In some ways, the most painful battles were yet to be fought. No dream for a congregation that involves serious change every takes place without controversy and struggle. Some people still resisted the changes involved in following the dream of this new venture in faith. Some choose to go elsewhere and losing valuable, respected members, and in many cases close friends, is always extremely painful for a pastor and congregation!.

Ray Lester told me about his last Christmas sermon at Advent, which coincided roughly with the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. His sermon title can break your heart, "You can kill the Dreamer, but you can't kill the Dream!" Dan Schmiechen had his own beautiful way of describing the role of his partner in ministry, Ray Lester . He said to me, "I think of Ray Lester as a kind of Moses. He heard God's call and he helped to lead us through the perils of the wilderness and he brought us to the promised land, but like Moses, by the time he got there, he was all worn out, he didn't get the chance to enter the promised land himself." I think there is wide spread recognition that both pastors provided remarkable, even sacrificial, leadership through those difficult times.

Would Madison Christian Community have been possible without the gift of the land? I don't know, but I do know it would have been much, much more difficult! And even with the gift of the land, Madison Christian Community would struggle through the early years of its existence. There would continue to be financial struggles. The staff would still wear long winter underwear in the office to conserve energy. Did you know, back at Sheboygan and Eau Claire, when they couldn't pay the fuel bills, the idea was floated about putting up a windmill? Synod subsidies would last for twenty years before Madison Christian community became fully self supporting. At times, I suspect, the pastors may have wondered where their next pay check was coming from.

Now, we can see that as a problem, or we can see it as a means by which God pruned his people and nurtured in them a spirit of courage and gratitude; courage to welcome new forms of ministry and gratitude for God's gracious gifts and gratitude for others who reached out to us in our time of need. I believe that spirit of gratitude is alive and well at MCC and it has helped us to become a more creative and compassionate community of faith. I don't think it's just a coincidence that MCC emerging from it's struggles, became the first church in Madison to provide sanctuary for refugees from Central America and over the past twenty years has helped, in some way, to resettle 41 refugees from six different countries. That same spirit of compassion has helped to create the Harvest of Hope program, Treasury of Love, Hope's Special Fund, Haiti Partnership, and many

other programs of care for people in need.

So, when Herman and Gilman gave that piece of land, they did more than help us financially, I think their generosity helped us to become a more grateful and compassionate community of faith. Maybe, in the end, that will prove to be the greatest gift of all!

Some Reflections on the writing of "This Gifted Land"

As you can easily imagine, the assignment to put together the story of the gift by the Dauck family of the land on which our church rests was fascinating and very challenging. I spent several hours visiting with members of the Dauck family and with members of Madison Christian Community who played a role in the beginnings of what I have come to call, "the Dream Church". The results are interesting and inspiring but probably still fall short of presenting an accurate account of what actually took place.

It is common in oral histories for remembered events to be placed either before or after the time in which they occurred. I've been told that some of the struggles I described during Advent's sojourn down on Eau Claire and Sheboygan actually took place after the decision was made to form the ecumenical partnership with Community of Hope. If this is true, it raises an interesting point for us to think about. It suggests that the three miracles I spoke about did not result in the life and mission of Madison Christian Community becoming less difficult and challenging, but just the opposite. That runs contrary to our normal way of thinking. We like to believe that when we respond in faith to God's leading, everything we do is blessed. I still believe that to be true, but I also have come to believe that sometimes God's blessing take the form of leading us into difficult and painful times of testing. This is that divine work of pruning that tests our faith and hopefully engenders in us a spirit of humility, trust, and compassion.

I do feel a need to correct any impression I might have given that Community of Hope came to "the marriage" with empty hands. In point of fact, the members of Community of Hope and the United Church of Christ contributed generously to the beginnings of this venture of faith through

individual gifts by members and through grants and loan money from the denomination. We needed each other then and we need each other today for many reasons.

One interesting historical bit of information shared with me was the fact that the invitation to the first meeting to discuss the possibility of an ecumenical parish came, not from Advent, but from the Catholic priests at St. Thomas Aquinas parish. It reminds us of how widespread the spirit of ecumenism was in those days. And we might well pray that this spirit would return again to bless the whole family of God and to bless this conflicted world in which we carry out our life and mission.

David Keeseey-Berg