

Ministry Opportunity in the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod

HILDALE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Position: Pastor

1. **Brief overview of the history of the congregation and the wider community in which it is located.**

The Congregation:

The Independent Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church, which was the precursor to Hilldale, was founded in September of 1956, and joined the ELCIC Manitoba Northwestern Ontario Synod in April of 1983. The original congregation (58) grew dramatically in the early years due to the steady arrival of immigrants from Finland.

Early in 1992, a group sat down to discuss the future of the congregation. They hoped to better serve future generations, provide room for growth, and still take care of the aging Finnish population. The result of those ideas was a new church, a new name, and new ideas for reaching out to the community.

With tremendous preparation, volunteer effort, donations, and downright *sisu* (stubborn determination), Hilldale Lutheran Church was born. Construction of the new church began in 1995, and a dedication service was held on December 1, 1996. It was enormous in comparison to earlier buildings, and beautiful in its simplicity. Today, it still reflects its Finnish heritage, and at the same time reaches out to serve the needs of all who desire to hear the word of God, Finnish and English speakers alike.

Historically, an English “mission” had become a very important part of parish ministry. The hard work of a succession of English mission pastors led to the development of a core English congregation, which grew gradually. During that same period, the Finnish cohort within the congregation began to decline, due to a combination of mortality and reduced immigration to Northwestern Ontario in favour of larger urban centers.

Pastor Ed Long became the interim English pastor from 2003 until his retirement in the spring of 2006. In that same year Pastor Arleen Berg accepted the position of Associate Pastor to serve the English congregation until her retirement in September 2013. In June 2014, Hilldale welcomed a new Associate Pastor when Rev. Nancy Ringham (Anglican) served in the position until her retirement in 2019. Throughout the entire period (2000-2022), Pastor Jari Lahtinen served as Hilldale’s Senior Pastor, as well as ministering to Finnish congregants. Pastor Lahtinen retired in July of 2022.

With his retirement, and with the assistance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Hilldale sought to recruit a bilingual pastor who would minister to both Finnish and English-speaking congregants. Pastor Sirpa Tolppanen accepted Hilldale’s call and her installation service was held in November of 2022. Pastor Tolppanen returned to Finland in February of 2024, which created the current vacancy.

After deliberation and discussion with Bishop Jason Zinko, the Hilldale Parish Council felt that the church’s potential for future growth could be best served by: a) recruiting a bilingual pastor

from Canada/USA; or b) recruiting an English-speaking pastor and finding alternate ways (e.g. lay ministry, pulpit supply) to meet the spiritual and sociocultural needs of Finnish congregants.

The Community:

The City of Thunder Bay entails a large geographic area of 448 sq. km. (173 sq. mi.). The census metropolitan area of Thunder Bay has a population of 123,258 and consists of the City of Thunder Bay, the municipalities of Oliver Paipooonge and Neebing, the townships of Shuniah, Conmee, O'Connor, and Gillies, and the Fort William First Nation. Thunder Bay offers a range of affordable housing for sale or rent (current [2024] vacancy rate is 2.9%, rated as good by CMHC). Thunder Bay is a regional hub for all of northwestern Ontario, and has many amenities and services not typically found in smaller urban areas.

While it is still home to natural resource-based industries (sawmills, pulp & paper, mining, grain elevators), the economy is gradually incorporating more 'white collar' activity (post secondary education, research, commerce, transportation, tourism, etc.). The mineral exploration and refining industry are expected to be a major economic driver for the foreseeable future.

The City is centered on beautiful Lake Superior shoreline, and is minutes away from fishing, hiking, Nordic and alpine skiing, golf, camping, boating/sailing, ice and rock climbing, and a variety of gyms and fitness clubs such as the Canada Games Complex along with other indoor and outdoor pools. The Thunder Bay 55 Plus Centre offers a wide range of programs for seniors, as do many neighbourhood Community Centers.

The City has a very active sports scene which includes soccer, baseball, softball, hockey, tennis, pickleball, football, golf and curling. It also has a vibrant arts community that includes professional and amateur theatre, several performing arts venues, the Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra, a variety of choirs and orchestras and several multi-cultural organizations. A new Art Gallery is currently being built on the waterfront at Marina Park.

<https://www.visitthunderbay.com/en/plan-your-trip/visitor-guide.aspx>

The City also offers a wide variety of educational opportunities and is home to Confederation Community College, Lakehead University (and law faculty) and a campus of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine as well as the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Center and progressive cancer care clinic.

2. Brief description of the current opportunities and challenges of the congregation

Demographic shift: The Parish Council is generally agreed that, particularly in the next 5 to 10 years, the Finnish cohort within the congregation will diminish significantly due to mortality and reduced immigration. As a result, the congregation will become more anglicized or multi-cultural. As such, we need an English speaking (or bilingual) pastor to fill the current vacancy. At the same time, we need to provide relevant worship and pastoral support for both the English and Finnish populations. The gradual shift away from dominant Finnish traditions will be stressful for some.

Outreach: Effective outreach has been a challenge historically. The church has had minimal success in engaging the immediate neighbourhood, and has a limited profile in the city, other than as a performing arts venue. We need to raise awareness of Hilldale as a strong, relevant, faith community. We need to create or capitalize on existing opportunities for Hilldale to connect with an increasingly diverse population in the City of Thunder Bay.

Inclusiveness: Hilldale has had somewhat limited involvement with many contemporary issues affecting the City of Thunder Bay. Examples would include homelessness, access to affordable housing, food security, the opioid drug crisis, or engagement with identifiable populations within the community (e.g. 2SLGBTQIA, indigenous peoples, refugees, the elderly, and new Canadians). Demands on economic, social and spiritual support systems are intense. As such, opportunities for advocacy and involvement are numerous.

3. Brief description of the worship, program, staffing, volunteer and stewardship practices of the congregation.

Worship:

9:30am Sundays: English Worship Service & Sunday School

- Communion 1st and 3rd Sunday of each month

11:00am Sundays: Finnish Worship Service

- Communion – 1st Sunday of each month
- Use Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) or Church of Finland lectionary (*Virsikirja*)

Joint Finnish and English Service held once a month 10am

Services followed by coffee and pulla (Finnish coffee bread) fellowship

Finnish home worship services historically held monthly but less regular recently.

Program:

Hilldale is involved with the following service ministries and/or partnerships:

- Street Reach Ministries – dealing with homeless and marginalized individuals.
- Lutheran Community Care: board member for agency that provides services and support to promote the social inclusion of persons with developmental disabilities.
- Victorian Order of Nurses Adult Day Program
- Disaster Relief – primarily through Canadian Lutheran World Relief
- Suomi Conference – in conjunction with other ELC Finnish churches in Canada and USA
- Co-operative venture with Gathering Table (Anglican Parish) to provide donations to food banks and feeding programs.
- Have provided worship services in Lutheran and Anglican parishes who have no rostered clergy (Pass Lake, Schreiber, Nipigon, Fort Frances, South Porcupine).

Staffing & Volunteers:

Paid Staff:

Pastor – full-time

Cleaner – on contract (~2 years)

Pulpit Supply (retired pastors)

Secretary – full-time (~25 years)

Musician – on contract (~5 years)

Volunteers:

Church Council Treasurer (with honorarium)

Volunteer Committee

Music Team

A/V Team in Livestream Studio

Lay Leadership

Transportation

Altar Guild

Sunday School Teachers

Ladies Groups (e.g. Touhutiltat)

Website Editor

Transition Committee (2022/23)

Youth Leader

Ushers

Kitchen crew

Stewardship Practices:

Despite ongoing increases in operating costs (e.g. software licenses, heating, capital maintenance, etc.) there have been no formal stewardship campaigns aimed at increasing income in the last decade.

4. A brief description of the priorities for ministry over the next 1-5 years.

In the short term one of the key priorities will be to support the congregation, particularly the elderly Finns, through the aftermath of the past five years which has seen: a pandemic during which they were unable to gather in the church; the retirement of the Finnish Senior Pastor after two decades of service; and the recruitment and departure of a bilingual pastor after one year of service. There is a grieving and adjustment process that must be worked through, as well as a need to re-engage parishioners in some of the familiar and comforting aspects of parish life.

At the same time, Hilldale needs to more clearly define its role in mission and outreach in the immediate neighbourhood, within the City, and beyond.

Hilldale also needs to consider how they can work through the National Church, the MNO Synod, and the resources developed through the Ecumenical Stewardship Center (ESC) to develop a congregational stewardship ministry. There are a variety of excellent ESC resources available through the **Lake Institute for Faith and Giving** that could be used to encourage stronger financial support for Hilldale's ministry in the years ahead.

<https://lakeinstitute.org/resource-library/ecumenical-stewardship-center-resources/>

5. List the top 5 Areas of Ministry for your next rostered minister to prioritize in the first 1-5 years of ministry, as listed in the Congregational Profile.

- a. Worship Leadership & Preaching
- b. Transformational/Redevelopment: strategies to lead a declining congregation into hope and new life.
- c. Ministry with Youth and Young Adults
- d. Inter-personal Climate: exhibit and inspire a spirit of one community.
- e. Social Ministry: promote awareness of community needs (e.g. 2SLGBTQIA, new Canadians, Indigenous, elderly, homeless) and participation in action and advocacy on their behalf.

Interested persons may request a detailed Congregational Profile and the procedure for call process in the MNO Synod from:

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