

'Better together': four historic Muskegon churches become one

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Kayla Renie | MLive.com

A view of Samuel Lutheran Church, located at 540 Houston Ave., in Muskegon on Friday, Nov. 22, 2019.

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MUSKEGON COUNTY, MI -- A new church launched in Muskegon on Sunday, the result of a long-planned merger between four historic congregations.

Harbor of Grace Lutheran Church hosted its first official worship service as an official congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Consequently, the Lutheran churches Immanuel, 930 Creston St.; Our Savior's, 1132 W. Southern Ave.; St. Luke's, 1 655 W. Norton Ave., and Samuel Lutheran, 540 Houston Ave.; will cease to operate as separate entities, instead incorporating into the new church body.

Sunday's service was held in the now-former Samuel Lutheran church. It involved both the legal and financial formation of a new nonprofit religious institution and the adoption of a new church constitution, which replaces the four individual constitutions of the four original churches.

Sunday's service also established new leadership for Harbor Grace. The Rev. Jane Mountain, formerly the pastor at Our Savior's, will serve as transitional lead pastor, and the Rev. Chris Anderson, formerly of Samuel Lutheran, will serve as a contracted pastor.

The merger comes out of years of planning, as well as joint worship and community service opportunities among all members. Over the course of the last year, in partnership with a consultant and the regional

synod – an administrative body that functions somewhat like a diocese within other churches – the congregations decided “that we could be better together than singly,” said Mountain.

On Sept. 8, the communities voted to officially approve the merger, and on Sunday, the move became official with the adoption of a new constitution, the transfer of all assets and liabilities from each church into the new one, the installation of new leadership and the election of a new council.

In preparation for the official merger, the congregations have worshipped together nearly every other week for the last several months. Immanuel sold its building – St. Luke’s and Our Savior’s will soon follow suit – and so the congregants rotated between church buildings.

“It gives us a chance of being together without one church being the prominent of the four,” Mountain said.

Eventually, the Samuel Lutheran building will be renovated and refurbished to house the new church, “so we’re not moving into Samuel, we’re moving into Harbor of Grace,” she said.

There will be rotating worship services throughout December, leading up to Christmas, at the remaining three churches. Those three churches also will host their own Christmas Eve services this year.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has existed as a denomination since 1987, and traces its roots to the arrival of Lutheran immigrants from Northern Europe in the mid-17th century.

As with many other religious orders, nationwide membership in the church has been on the decline, dropping from over 5 million at the denomination’s founding to [about 3.5 million in 2017](#). As church attendance has decreased in general, the power and “robustness” of any individual congregation can feel diminished as well, said Mountain.

“When someone comes on a Sunday morning and sees empty pews, they don’t see what goes on during the week between Sundays,” such as community service, said Mountain. “Our worship has always been robust, but when we’re all together and there aren’t empty pews, it makes it more accessible to visitors, and encouraging to those who visit.”

By blending these churches, she added, there will be more bodies to make up the different ministries that each formerly operated independently, such as music, quilting, and operating food pantries. Four separate small choirs have now joined to form one larger choir with about 30 members.

The process is not without its challenges. Administratively, staffers from each church will stay on, and two music directors will combine their efforts, for example. But figuring out exactly what the new church will offer, both to its congregants and to the larger Muskegon community, will take time.

There will also be a transitional period as each church congregation gets to know the others and learns to blend their respective practices. Over time, churches develop their own cultures, even if they follow the same worship structure, said Mountain.

Perhaps equally difficult for many congregants is the emotion of moving from a longtime church community into an entirely new one. Some of these churches have long roots in the community; Samuel Lutheran was dedicated in 1875, and Our Savior’s was dedicated in 1886.

Mountain said that the new community is taking time to grieve the loss of their previous “congregational lives,” as well as the physical spaces that had served as many people’s spiritual homes. She quoted Winston Churchill: “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

But, she added, a church is many things, not just a building and a group of worshippers. Most importantly, she said, it is “what God is doing among us.”

