

Embracing diversity is rewarding

BY MATTHEW H. DIEGEL

OUR Saviour's Lutheran Church began its life in 1907 as the First Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church of Port Arthur. In 1938 it changed its name, in part because members increasingly saw themselves as Norwegian Canadian, and not as immigrants. It was also to tell the city that they desired to be a community of faith for all people, rather than only from one country.

Throughout the decades since then, this diversity and inclusivity has been both a vision and a challenge. Over the years, our national church sought to address similar issues.

At its 2019 convention, it established a task force on racism, white supremacy, and racial justice. As a result, the 2022 convention issued a statement that named racism as a sin, acknowledged the church's role in perpetuating it, and called on all expressions of the church to actively work toward full diversity, equity and inclusion.

The national office has appointed someone to lead the effort of educating and guiding the church through this process of change. At the 2025 convention, a report will be presented, highlighting the progress made and the work still to be done.

When the pandemic restrictions began to ease in 2022, our Congregational Council in its visioning sought to learn how we might connect more with our community, meeting needs and welcoming its diverse population, including making our building space available.

That spring, I received a mes-



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Equity Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

sage from Leema Farha from the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association, inquiring whether our congregation might consider renting space for classes of the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program — specifically, refugees. Without any hesitation, the Congregational Council members agreed in principle.

The request was so aligned with our vision that the Council realized that they hadn't even asked about rental fee to ask. Over the next few months, we worked out the agreement, arranging for three classrooms in the building's basement, plus a teachers' space, as well as the rental fee.

The first classes started in September of 2022. This has expanded to four classrooms, with one in the sanctuary, with about 30-50 students enrolled, and four teachers and one assistant.

Over the past three years, our congregation has acted more as a host than a landlord. We have come to realize and value that we are offering a safe place for

these refugees from many lands to gather and to learn.

Through our interactions with them — including through special meals and gatherings, and meeting each other in the building — we have begun to understand more fully what it means to welcome strangers in our midst, respecting them and their cultures and religions, and sharing who we are. I've come to look forward to greeting the students each morning and chatting with them during breaks. These students have many gifts to share as friends and fellow citizens.

The teachers at our learning events have shared valuable insights with our congregation, highlighting the ongoing work both the church and the broader community must do to address racism and ensure full inclusion for the diverse populations within our city. These formal and informal discussions have also broadened our understanding of the needs of vulnerable individuals in our community — both those we are familiar with and those living on the margins, who are often unseen and unheard.

We look forward to continuing this relationship with the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association and LINC program as we welcome people to our community and into our lives.

Matthew H. Diegel is a pastor of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Thunder Bay since 1995. He works towards a vision to make Thunder Bay a safe and a welcoming community for all. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.