

Neighbor Congregations Working Together

A joint presentation Pastor Rob Guenther (St. John's New Ulm) and Pastor Nate Scharf (St. Paul's New Ulm)
At the WELS National Education Conference 2025 - 75 Minutes
Tuesday, June 24, 2025

I. Introductions - Rob Guenther and Nate Scharf and 24 others

II. Challenges Before Partnering

- A. 160-year-old congregation and a 77-year-old daughter congregation with many memories
- B. Sharing a School (governance, funding, building, staffing, decision making)
- C. Sometimes Competitive Nature or perception of it
- D. Disproportionate membership Numbers between the Congregations
- E. Agreeing on vision and how to fund it - where/when are we separate and/or together
- F. Personalities (of churches, members, pastors, teachers, staff ministers, staff, etc.)
- G. Honoring the past while not being chained by the things that aren't working (non-doctrinal)

What other Challenges have you experienced in trying to work together in your setting?

III. Biblical Principles – Solutions – Prayer and Patience

- A. **Cooperate** - Ephesians 4:1-3 – As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.
- B. **Communicate and Be Transparent** – Ephesians 4:15 – Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.
- C. **Resist the Urge to Be Territorial** - Mark 9:39-41 – “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.”
- D. **Keep a Kingdom Mindset**
 - 1. Pastoring in Alaska
 - 2. Recruiting at Luther Preparatory School
 - 3. Were member transfers losses? Were students who never came or dropped out losses?
 - 4. We are called to go (Matthew 28:20). We are called to love (John 13:35)

What would you add to this list?

IV. How We're Partnering Now – OTNU “One Team New Ulm”

- A. Assemble a group of like-minded individuals (not secretive) gathered around common goals and with ministry staff representation and brainstorm/plan/think of ways to work together especially around outreach. The group “John and Paul Ministries” formed in New Ulm.
- B. JohnandPaulMinistries.com
- C. Shared Efforts in other areas: (especially in areas of overlap)
 - 1. Martin Luther College Early Childhood Learning Center - Every other week taking turns. Joint events together.

2. St. Paul's Lutheran School - Greeting at the door & "Pastor Questions" at School
3. Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors - Taking turns among the 5 pastors to lead. Each congregation hosts every other.
4. Jail Ministry - Taking turns among the 5+ doing a weekly Bible Study.
5. Oak Hills / Trifecta / Sunset/Highland - Taking turns among the 5 pastors.
6. Lenten Rotation
7. Pulpit Rotation in the Summer enabling vacations as well as other ministry efforts
8. Cross Advertise - Family Bible Nights, Grief Groups, Cancer Groups, Mom Groups, Marriage Enrichment and Pre-marriage seminars, congregational camping outing, waterpark day with both congregations, other things that may come and go
9. Outreach Events (John and Paul Ministries)
 - a) Soccer Camp, Vacation Bible School, Art Camp (SJ leads; SP helps.)
 - b) Summer Send-Off (SP leads; SJ helps.) with joint worship
 - c) Winter Carnival (SP leads; SJ helps.)
 - d) Easter Canvass (SP leads; SJ helps.)
10. Communicate it regularly in print, email and from verbal announcements

What are areas you think you could most easily coordinate with your neighbor church/school?

V. Challenges While Partnering

- A. Sharing finances w/ a disproportionate membership
- B. Sharing votes w/ a disproportionate membership (building consensus in many things and a lot more work communicating, explaining, putting out clear documents and more explaining, a lot of patience).
- C. Ongoing communication – try to make this joint communication and not revised communication if it is something that could be misinterpreted.
- D. Scharf can be kind of a tool.
- E. Guenther can be an even bigger tool.
- F. Learn to apologize and go talk to people face to face rather than silo-ing and stewing.
- G. Different systems, hidden curriculum, and different financial accounting (Worship planning – who, when and where, FACTS or in-house system, Fiscal year or calendar year, etc.)
- H. Learning to work with a local team and extended team
- I. Building Projects, School costs, Called staff at the school from different congregations, etc.

VI. What the Future Holds?

- A. Continued efforts toward collaboration vs. competition
- B. St. Paul's continues to be bigger than St. John's.
- C. St. John's continues to be better than St. Paul's.:
- D. Our unique (Martin Luther College) setting and important role

VII. What this might look like for you...

- A. We have 900 and 2,000 members. What does this look like on your scale – bigger, smaller.
- B. But you can still do it...
- C. Things you'll need...
 1. Kingdom Mindset (When the Kingdom wins, we win.)
 - Humility and Prayer and Patience
 - a) Humility – Willingness to admit that you may not always be right...
 - b) Humility – Willingness to admit when you were clearly wrong...
 - c) Humility – Willingness to Yield (even when you know you're right)
 - d) Humility – Willingness to wait for God's timing
 2. Clear communication

- a) "Let's go eat, grandma!" is very different from, "Let's go eat grandma!" Print, Electronic, Face to Face
 - b) Go buy the person coffee, a taco or a beer and talk
 - c) Go buy the person coffee, a taco or a beer and talk again
 - d) Go buy the person coffee, a taco or a beer and talk yet again
 - e) What do you have to lose? At least you get coffee, a taco or a beer!
3. Transparency breaks down barriers
 - a) Admit when you're wrong
 - b) Share reports
 - c) Share financial records - What do you have to hide? (If anything... **why**? Seriously... what are you protecting?). Welcome questions and seek to find the answers.
 - d) Share your feelings (not in a MN passive aggressive attack) and be willing to take the time to listen to concerns, and earn the opportunity to help move past them together.
 4. Third Party blessings. An outside leader's look. Ask other congregations what they have done and what worked, what didn't work. We have enough churches that there is likely someone in a similar situation who has tried and done something similar to what you are trying to do. New Ulm has never been accused of being cutting edge. Sometimes more eyes on something and more advice from someone outside your group with a fresh perspective could be helpful. This could be an additional congregation, a WELS congregational counselor, a group like Grace in Action, Crossroads, etc.
 5. Seek to understand and honor the past AND, where needed, grow past it to address new challenges and recognize new blessings. (No tuition may have worked in the days health insurance was minimal and we sometimes may have under-supported workers.)
 6. Seeking to find the points of cooperation and holding those up for all to see. Joint video updates. Speaking well of each other publicly. Not everyone will get on board always, but you can do a lot if most are on board.
 7. Don't go away. Be persistent in prayer and in your efforts to work together. Be patient.

VIII. Why is it worth it?

1. Better together – Philippians 4:14-15 – “Yet it was good of you to share my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only...” Often we can combine ministries that are redundant and can be combined which frees up time for other good ministry opportunities, better or greater offerings together.
2. They will know you belong to Christ by your love - John 13:35 – “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” We model our love for each other in a congregation and as we live with, speak of, and work with fellow sister congregations.
3. It is a blessing to have this fellowship – Revelation 1:4 -5 – “John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” You have brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for, be prayed for, and rely on as we share the gospel and look forward to Christ's coming.

What other blessings do you see in working together? What blessings have you experienced?