



Conifer, Colorado

Transition Team Report

January 2025

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. Proverbs 3:5

1. Introduction:

The Risen Lord Lutheran Church (RLLC) Transition Team was launched concurrently with our call to Pastor Rita Thompson. At the Synod's recommendation, we conducted the transition process as if we had no current pastor and were seeking to formulate a strategic plan for RLLC and prepare for a future pastoral call. The Transition Committee completed its work, compiled the data and prepared this transition report for the Council and congregation. We note the listening circle participants voiced their belief that we have been blessed with Pastor Rita Thompson joining us to lead the congregation on this continued hopeful journey of prosperity.

With the support of a Synod Consultant, the team conducted a self-evaluation to pinpoint our strengths and weaknesses at Risen Lord. We spent the past seven months collecting data through numerous small-group listening circles, giving all RLLC members who wished to participate an opportunity to contribute feedback. Members who were not present in the adjacent community received phone calls, emails, and hard-copy questionnaires to give their thoughts. This enabled us to get as much input from our members as possible considering not all reside nearby. We focused on four major areas of RLLC: memories from the past, central challenges, positive thoughts of our present, and what we wished for the church's future state.

The Transition Team consisted of: Sommer Eichelberger, Dr. Peter Braun, Linda Kerber, Jaime Knaub and Paul Graver. We prepared this report telling our congregation's story and representing the Risen Lord family and values. We will use this information to reflect on the past, ponder the future of our church and implement change. This report will focus on the following areas: our Community, Congregation (Church History and Leadership), Findings, and Future Dreams and Goals.

2. Our Community:

Conifer Colorado is a charming mountain community located 35 miles southwest of Denver along state highway route 285. Conifer consists of two large grocery store-based commercial centers on each side of the highway, with other smaller commercial centers scattered nearby. Because route 285 is the main transportation corridor for the entire region, most residents drive on it while traveling to and from Denver. There is no official downtown Conifer because it is an unincorporated part of Jefferson County, CO. There are additional unincorporated towns before and after Conifer along 285 that have limited amenities. Because of this, it is difficult to precisely determine the total population of the surrounding region that feeds into Conifer. The

population of Conifer listed in 2020 was 8354 residents. Approximately fifty percent of Conifer's population has arrived since 1995, while seventy-five percent has arrived since 1990. The median age of Conifer residents is 48. The population of nearby Pine CO. is 3898, while further south the town of Bailey has 8042 residents. To the north, the nearby subdivision of Morrison has approximately 500 residents while the western portion of Evergreen (within a reasonable driving distance of Conifer) is around 1000 residents. Collectively this adds up to approximately 22000 residents in the region that travel to (or through) Conifer.

Originally known as Bradford Junction in the 1860's, this community was mostly a stagecoach stop for those traveling to the South Park region. Conifer officially became a community around 1900 when a new post office was built. This original community foothold was located at the intersection of two stagecoach paths. This location had a large barn and Field's Trading Post (most notably known for a stuffed 4-legged chicken)! There was also a tavern owned by George Conifer for which most people believe the community was named. A one-room schoolhouse was built up the hill from the large yellow barn in 1920. This Little White Schoolhouse, the barn and the trading post buildings still exist to this day! The Little White Schoolhouse was used as a Jefferson County preschool until it's closing in 2012. One Risen Lord's parishioner was a member of this last class and will be graduating High School in 2025!

Risen Lord Lutheran Church currently operates in the St. Laurence Episcopal Church located across the road from the Little White Schoolhouse. There are four elementary schools, one middle school and two high schools in the general area surrounding the church. There are approximately 20 churches in the Conifer area including a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church in Bailey and another ELCA Lutheran Church in Evergreen. Other faith denominations represented in the region include 7th Day Adventist, Latter Day Saints, Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic, Jehovah Witness, Episcopal, Jewish, Methodist and multiple non-denominational Community Churches.

3. Our Congregation (Note: this is an abbreviated history of RLLC. Preparation of a more extensive history is underway.):

The Risen Lord Lutheran Church congregation has been worshipping together for 28 years since our first official service on October 13, 1996.

a. Risen Lord Formation History

In the fall of 1996, Teresa & Bill Burns put an ad in the High Timber Times seeking anyone interested in forming a Lutheran Church. The first meeting was at Barbie Graham's dance studio in the gym (now the Peak Academy of Dance). The Burns, Davises, Woods, Batys and Shrivvers were there, indicating enough interest to form a church. Early on the group also met in the Burns' home.

The group first met on Sundays at the Aspen Park Community Center. Children's time was in the kitchen around a huge butcher block table or outside if the weather was nice. We had to set up and tear down everything each week at this location.

Todd and Kim Moore subsequently joined our church and along with some others they obtained a storage closet for all our materials. Dwight Wood fashioned a fold-up altar. We had only supply pastors initially. Jareth Brown was one and Cathy Baty found out after one service that one of her closest friends was his daughter.

In Jan 1997, Risen Lord was recognized by ELCA's Rocky Mountain Synod and authorized as a worshipping community and working toward a fully established congregation and mission church. In October 1997, Risen Lord held a one-year celebration "Oktoberfest" with brats, potluck and dancing.

We subsequently hired Pastor John Nordin from Boulder as a part time pastor. He eventually surrendered the position for personal reasons. In the summer of 1998, Howard Kreisselmeyer was worshipping with us and took over as our part time pastor. In March of 1998, Emily Moore began serving as a youth worship assistant. In the winter of 1999, we hired Pastor Beth Graham as a full-time pastor with the Synod's support and we established an office above Mauro's restaurant.

In 2002, we signed a contract to rent the Mt. Acres Homeowners' building in Shaffer's Crossing for worship and offices and we moved out of the Aspen Park Community Center. The HOA still used the building for meetings. The Virginias joined and Frank organized a yearly skate/BBQ on their ponds. He took over as the choir director from Rita Santee.

Pastor Beth stayed with us, working to obtain land to build a church. We found four acres on Mt. Evans Blvd and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Synod who purchased the land. During this period, we experienced attrition due to age and people moving to warmer climates. While some new families have joined, our membership has remained fairly constant since then. When Pastor Beth retired, Pastor Jake Jacobson stepped in as our interim pastor. He was wise and knowledgeable, and the kids loved him.

Circa 2014, Pastor Stefan Rickman accepted our call to become Risen Lord's full-time pastor. Pastor Stefan led us for 6 1/2 years. During his tenure he did not like using the Mt. Acres HOA site. Risen Lord then met at the Conifer Stage Door Theater for three months. It was at this location that Pastor Stefan led the congregation in voting on whether to relinquish the land to the Synod and allow them to sell it. This was a very hard decision to make. Ultimately the congregation's decision was based on not having the financial resources to build a new church and continue operations while

carrying a full-time pastor's salary. We relinquished the Mission Investment Funds back to the Synod and gave up the property, as the congregation voted to relinquish the land to the synod.

This led Risen Lord to rent/renovate two storefronts facing the Conifer Post Office on Aspen Park. As our financial resources were depleted, Pastor Rickman approached RLLC to step down from Full-Time Pastor to Part-Time Pastor. He also sought Part-Time employment at Trinity Lutheran in Littleton. He and his family subsequently left RLLC to move to OH so that his wife, Natalie, could be closer to her aging parents.

b. Church History and Leadership:

Risen Lord Lutheran Church was founded in 1996 as a mission congregation. The original location of Risen Lord was off Parker Rd. in Pine. Risen Lord has been known to have a nomadic life along the Hwy 285 corridor. Our congregation has placed importance on outreach ministries and benevolence rather than being tied down to a building and the accompanied expenses. We have always defined "church" as the people and not the building in which we worship. In 2015, we moved from a strip mall in Conifer with a full-time pastor to a little mountain church where we presently share space with St. Laurence Episcopal. The move was financially necessary as the monthly rent was depleting our funds. We came to St. Laurence with Pastor Teri Hermsmeyer, who was an Interim Pastor.

Shortly after settling into the space at St. Laurence, we hired another part-time pastor, Kim Gonia. During the first couple years at St. Laurence, our membership declined with the passing of several long-time members as well as the impact of Covid. During the statewide Covid lockdown, Risen Lord started a zoom service, where we incorporated remote communion, music and fellowship. In addition to weekly zoom services, there was also a weekly prayer service.

A recent change in leadership brings challenges; however, the members' willingness to serve and volunteer has helped us to persevere. Because our membership is relatively low, there is an intimate feel to our congregation – drawing people in; however, people must volunteer often and for multiple roles and tasks.

In the fall of 2024, the congregation took a vote to accept an inclusion statement and become a Reconciling in Christ congregation, which passed. This lets our greater community know that Risen Lord is a safe and welcoming place for all. We adopted the following statement:

Risen Lord is proud to be a Reconciling in Christ congregation. We commit to welcoming, including, and celebrating God's boundless diversity reflected in every person.

As a community, we delight in welcoming all, without judgment. This welcome is inclusive of all ages, family configurations, skin colors, religious backgrounds, physical and mental abilities, social or economic standings, immigration status, and LGBTQIA+ people. There is a place here for you. We acknowledge the ways the Church has caused pain and suffering in the past. We commit to engaging, intentionally and faithfully, in the work of anti-racism, social and economic justice, and the care of creation, so that the fullness of God's love may be known.

As a congregation, we value the gifts of our differences. We pledge to work together, growing in our ability to love as God loves, without limits.

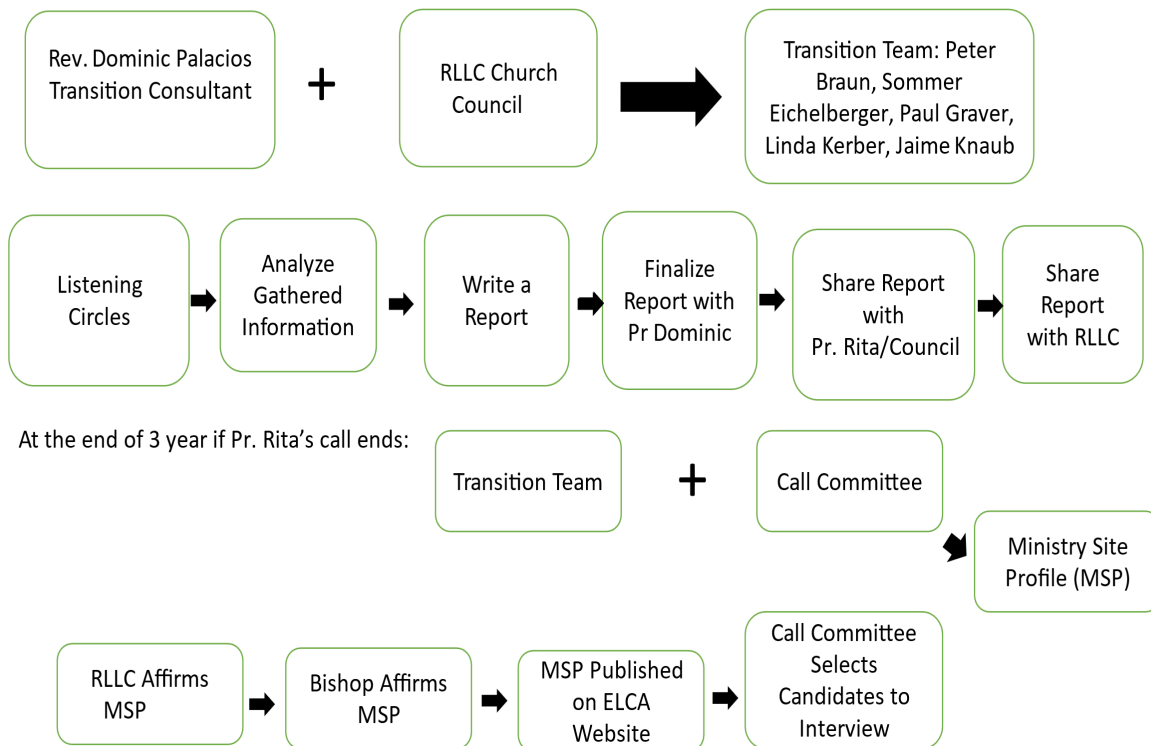
The financial realities have become apparent as the congregation size has been slowly declining. Covid, along with the passing of several members, has hindered our finances. We went from a full-time to part-time pastor as well as changed locations to remain financially sustainable. As of 2nd quarter, 2024, we were \$6,360 behind in offerings compared to what we budgeted at the annual meeting.

One of our current outreach ministries, Susannah's Hope, is a ministry of warmth as we hand out gently used coats at the King Soopers in Conifer. This ministry was started by Mary Black to honor her mother, Susannah. Her mom did not like to be cold, so it was Mary's mission after her mother passed to keep the community warm. Mary has since moved out of state; however, the members of Risen Lord continue to fulfill the mission of Susannah's Hope. Much work goes into the ministry, from collecting coats, washing them, ironing-on labels and, most importantly handing them out to our community in the fall and winter months. Risen Lord congregants of all ages support this ministry in some way or another.

Our current youth focus has been on our teenagers as they grow their faith each week by attending confirmation classes with Pastor Rita and Dan Graver. They have movie nights, game nights and confirmation camps during the summer. Because our congregation is on the smaller side, there are not always confirmation aged children. We had one child get confirmed in 2024 and four more are on track to be confirmed in 2025.

Since Covid, our Sunday school program for our youngest children has subsided. The council is aware of the need for Sunday school program and has been in communication with the parents. In the past, the parents of Sunday School aged children taught Sunday school. They would take turns each week teaching and utilizing resources through Lutheran websites for lessons. It is important for Risen Lord to include youth in worship with a weekly Children's message. There is an activity table near the front of the church where children can be seen and heard throughout the worship. Youth are encouraged to assist during worship, whether it be performing the readings, lighting candles, passing the collection plate and performing the sending at the end of the service.

4. The Transition Process Sequence



5. Findings and Data Analysis

RLLC is a small, close-knit, mountain-based congregation drawn from small front range towns southwest of Denver. Risen Lord's members are optimistic about future and want to encourage modest growth balanced against a desire to retain a friendly small church atmosphere.

Positive memories of Risen Lord; the congregation's assessment of the past worth preserving:

- A welcoming, inclusive congregation that exudes warmth and love for all people with a positive connection to St. Laurence Episcopal congregation
- A place of meaningful, thoughtful worship that educates and inspires
- A source of community outreach (e.g., Susannah's Hope, "God's Work. Our Hands.")
- Uplifting music during service by a gifted pianist

Challenging memories and aspects of Risen Lord that the congregation prefers left behind:

- The impact of Covid resulting in a loss of members and remote services

- Occasional political commentary/proselytizing from the pulpit
- Communications lacking; transparency, congregational meetings, hierarchy/how we always have done it
- Synod support vs. occasional Synod overreach

Concerns raised by the congregation:

- Ongoing budget challenges
- Reduced size of the congregation; (i.e. maintaining critical mass to survive)
- Transparency and communication (e.g., a lack of Congregational meetings)
- A lack of children to sustain youth programs
- Turnover of members and Pastors
- Volunteer burn out

Opportunities: these items we expressed as hopes for Risen Lord's future:

- Modest congregational growth with a future goal of supporting a full-time pastor
- Expanded youth numbers and programs
- Reinvigorating and increasing community outreach
- Creating a choir or other musical group
- Increased collaboration with St. Laurence

6. Final Thoughts:

The Transition Team worked with integrity and grace to gather the feelings and hopes of our congregation. The congregational participation in the listening circles was broad, supportive and positive. There was a general sense of optimism expressed and many voiced compliments and thanks for Pastor Rita's presence.

It is our wish that this information will be useful to Risen Lord's future. Our current pastor has inspired members by preaching what the Bible means for us today and has the energy to push us toward a bright future. We pray that God continues to guide us in our future journey. Amen.