



STORIES FROM THE SPECTRUM OF SUCCESS

Twists and Turns Lead to the Grove

By: Rev. Sarah Jones

New Heights Lutheran Church Trades In Its Church Building for a School

A banner reading “Welcome to the Grove” greets visitors the moment they enter New Heights Lutheran Church. Walk through the wide glass doors and you’ll see a welcome desk, a story wall, community rooms and a kids’ corner tree house. This central gathering space branches out into east and west wings, a layout familiar to anyone who has attended a public elementary school in the last 40 years. In 2023, New Heights bought the building from the Wisconsin Heights School District after it merged two of its elementary schools. The Grove, a new community-service organization launched by New Heights, makes the building not just a church setting but a true community center.

This was not the original plan. In 2006, the Rev. Rob Nelson was called to serve a two-point parish that included St. John’s Lutheran Church in Mazomanie, Wis., and Our

Saviour’s Lutheran Church in Black Earth, Wis. These two congregations, part of a rural community about 40 minutes away from Madison, soon agreed to merge and become New Heights. The new congregation planned to sell both its buildings and construct a new facility—something that could be not just a church but a public, community-serving space—on a plot of land adjacent to the old St. John’s building.

Over the next decade, New Heights nurtured a growing worshiping community, launched a lively and joy-filled Family Faith Night, and expanded its food and service ministries. Even during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the congregation found ways to thrive.

Yet the pandemic brought new obstacles: rising inflation, supply chain disruptions, and soaring costs for building materials. As expenses increased, the vision of constructing a new church and community center began to fade. The cost of a new facility—and the burden of a large mortgage—seemed overwhelming.



Visitors to the Grove are immediately welcomed by a greeter and the story of the new community center. The Grove has kept the familiar elementary school layout of its building to foster a sense of welcome.

Photo: The Grove

Just as the congregation was rethinking its building plans, an unexpected opportunity emerged.

"Someone called me about the building on a Thursday, we visited on Saturday, and we had our annual meeting that Sunday," recalls Pastor Nelson.

When Pastor Nelson and congregational leaders stepped into the closed elementary school, they immediately saw its promise. The building already had classrooms, a functioning HVAC system, and a gymnasium and auditorium in good condition. It was a space ready to be reimagined for ministry.

"We could not have planned for or built all these spaces in a new building. We can be so much more creative with all this space to fill!"

Pastor Rob Nelson



A map of the campus shows visitors where they can find church and community programming. Moving into an already-built school allowed New Heights to creatively use the existing space for church and community activities. Photo: The Grove

"We had been faithfully saving, faithfully trusting, thinking that we were going in one direction," says Pastor Nelson. "We had already done all the prep work. In two weeks' time, the congregation flipped the dream of building new to renovating the school." The congregation bought the building along with six-and-a-half surrounding acres and got to work turning it into something new.

Today the campus is visually stunning, every feature tying back into the theme of a grove – a group of trees sharing their root systems and creating something lush and abundant. The nursery ("nest") is available not just for congregational events

but for any community group providing childcare. Second-floor classrooms in the east wing (the "canopy") have been redesigned to include child-sized nooks, a tumbling room with mats and "quiet rooms" for kids who need a break from noise and visual stimulation.

Every week, 45 volunteers (35 of them youth) feed and provide Bible study activities for children of all ages. In summer, these spaces are transformed to serve a large vacation Bible school that welcomes more than 100 children. "We could not have planned for or built all these spaces in a new building," says Pastor Nelson. "We can be so much more creative with all this space to fill!"

The second floor of the east wing is filled with congregational life activities; the first is focused on community service. [Heights Unlimited Community Resource Center](#), a nonprofit organization that began as a ministry of New Heights, provides food, clothing, personal care items and household necessities to families across five rural zip codes. Heights Unlimited partners with the county, food pantries, grocery stores and local farmers to stock its shelves, and volunteers come from all over the community. [Joining Forces for Families](#), a social services initiative of Dane County, where New Heights is located, has a satellite office in the school building. Because the building was already familiar to Mazomanie residents as a public space, they are more comfortable visiting it.

New Heights and the Grove aren't done growing! To address a lack of childcare in the area, they are renovating several first- and second-floor rooms in the east wing to start the [New Heights Neighborhood Kids](#) after-school program, which will bring together the church, the school district and other community agencies. The Grove is also promoting its impressive gymnasium, which is already used many evenings during the week for community athletic programs. In fall 2025, New Heights will welcome local government leaders to plan, coordinate and create partnerships to maximize use of the Grove for the community's benefit. Wandering around the full campus, you can feel the connection of roots and branches, supporting and sheltering all who enter.

Though many of these programs were not part of the original plan, they align with the vision of New Heights. Pastor Nelson sees visioning as one of the most important aspects of faithful property stewardship. The congregation's governing body, formerly the Church Council, is now called the Vision Team and is charged with imagining and testing new ideas. "We threw a lot of spaghetti at the wall," says Pastor Nelson, and the congregation isn't afraid to clean up what doesn't stick. "We are remodeling a room that we thought could be a co-working space. No one's using it, so we'll try something else."



A participant in the Serve & Care fiber arts ministry works on a quilt at the Grove. With the abundance of classrooms, this ministry has its own dedicated space and has grown its volunteer capacity. Photo: The Grove



A local volleyball club practices in the Grove's gym. Because the community was already familiar with the building as a public space, residents have been more open to using the Grove for recreation and social activities. Photo: New Heights Lutheran



The Heights Unlimited food pantry is located on the ground floor of the east wing. The pantry serves households across five zip codes and has been able to expand operations in its new space. Photo: The Grove

Action is a crucial step in the visioning/discernment process of New Heights and the Grove. Instead of trying to create the perfect strategic plan, the church focuses on taking the next, most faithful step with eyes and ears open. “If something doesn’t work out, so what?” asks Pastor Nelson. “We tried it and got feedback. Permission for trial and error is essential.”

Other congregations may not be called to buy a school building, but they must be creative and flexible in thinking about the future of their property. Pastor Nelson recommends that leaders looking to do something different with their land and buildings start with strengthening their spiritual practice, attuning themselves to the Spirit’s movements and clarifying their vision for ministry. “Clear vision allows us to live well with the tension that God is doing something, but it’s going to be a surprise.”

Property Stewardship Lessons

- Cultivate a culture of visioning. Gather insight from as many congregation and community members as you can.
- Be open to surprise. Balance clarity of vision with flexibility; the original dream may morph into a more vital and vibrant opportunity.
- Seek co-stakeholders for your property. Build partnerships that increase community engagement and shared ownership.

Questions or resource requests? Contact us at CPRH@elca.org.