



STORIES FROM THE SPECTRUM OF SUCCESS

Preserving more than a Building

By: Rev. Sarah Jones

Vang Lutheran Church learns how wide its ministry reaches

It's hard to stumble across [Vang Lutheran Church](#) outside of Dennison, Minn. The church building is located in the middle of farm fields, at least a mile from major roadways. But if you do go looking for it, you'll be rewarded with the view of a pristine, white, clapboard church with a lawn bordered by new saplings. You might see some steeplejacks hard at work replacing old boards, or one of the church members tending to the community garden of squash, carrots, beets and potatoes. On Sundays, you might be lucky to hear the bell as it's rung by excited children before and after service.

Although Vang's building is hard to find, its ministry is well known in the towns and communities located in a 15-mile radius of the church. Local food pantries stock the produce grown in the small garden – up to 1,000 pounds each year. Residents connected to the church are supported in times of need by Vang's Care Team, which visits folks who are sick, grieving or in need of some companionship. The Care Team often brings one of the many frozen, homemade meals that members make and stock in the church kitchen. Vang is a church that knows how to care for its people and community. "This is a farm church," said Steve Trolley, a dedicated member of the Garden Committee. "We know how to get through tough times together."

In addition to being a farm church, Vang also carries the heritage of its Norwegian immigrant founders. The standing church building was designed by Olaf Hanson in the late 19th century



Vang Lutheran Church, Dennison, Minn., is restoring its iconic steeple as part of a larger renovation project to preserve the church's historic building. The church received a \$100,000 matching grant for its preservation project. Photo credit: Church Property Resource Hub



The annual lutefisk dinner and meatball supper serves over 300 people in Southeast Minnesota. The event celebrates the church's Norwegian roots and heritage. Photo by: Terri Lenz of the Kenyon Leader

and boasts many features that reflect the traditional stave churches of Norway, including the woodwork of the altar, the soaring ceilings and the sanctuary's layout in the style of a cross. The congregation keeps their Norwegian heritage alive through the annual lutefisk dinners, which bring hundreds of residents through their doors every fall. When the congregation learned that its steeple was in danger of collapsing, they rallied to find a way to not just patch it but to faithfully restore it as a treasured part of their ancestors' legacy.

The steeple restoration project was a huge undertaking for a small, aging, rural congregation. Members had always been able to find the funds necessary for immediate repairs, but the steeple would cost more than many of those smaller projects combined. One of the members, who also sits on the board of a local historical society, learned about a competitive capital grant for churches called the National Fund for Sacred Places. The grant would provide matching funds up to \$100,000, half the amount needed for the project. Vang decided to apply in 2021, and although it did not receive the grant, members were encouraged to apply again the next year. "The National Fund team walked us through the application and told us what we could improve," said Pam Kester, who worked on the grant. "That was really helpful, this was the first grant we'd ever applied for."

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Pam Kester

Vang strengthened its application by including all the different ways the church was benefiting its surrounding communities. "It was eye-opening to think about all the ways we were ministering to people," Kester said. "We didn't realize all that we were doing."

In addition to the Care Team's work and the garden's bounty, the lutefisk dinner helps educate and engage people in Norwegian tradition. The church also had supported over 40 interns who became Lutheran pastors all over the United States, raised money for a local nonmember family whose child was fighting cancer, and partnered with another local Lutheran church to support a full-time pastoral call. Vang's impact and reach impressed the National Fund for Sacred Places, and the church was accepted into the program in 2022.

Vang was thrilled to have its application accepted, but members knew they had to get to work – it was going to be a big push to raise \$100,000 for the matching funds. Vang was also the first rural church to be part of the program; the other members of their cohort were large congregations in urban areas with big donors. “We didn’t know how we were going to do it,” said Rain Kester, who served on the congregation council at the time. “We thought we were starting out way behind everyone else.” But after meeting their cohort members, Vang was encouraged and excited. “All these churches, even though they’re big, are navigating the same challenges we are,” Kester added. “Membership decline, old buildings, less money in the plate. If they could raise the funds, we could too.”

Vang met and exceeded its fundraising goals in just two years by reaching out to the same network of folks that they had impacted in their many decades of ministry. They found contact information for their former members and made phone calls, telling them about the project and why it was important. They talked to community leaders and organizations, all who had been touched by Vang in some way.

The donations poured in – gifts of money, time and talent. Residents who weren’t church members donated their labor, supplies and sponsored particular parts of the project that they cared about. While these donors may not have had a particular attachment to the steeple, they were interested in supporting the church. “We didn’t have to do much convincing,” Kester said. “We just had to pick up the phone and call people. A lot of folks were eager to support this place.”

Vang’s successful fundraising for its restoration project has been an inspiration in its community and beyond. Now at the end of their capital campaign and steeple project, the congregation continues their good work in Southeast Minnesota.



Vang’s sanctuary includes a beautifully preserved organ. The church’s commitment to preservation of its history and building is supported by its equally strong commitment to community service.

Photo credits: Northfield News and the Church Property Resource Hub



Vang is surrounded by farmland, some of which the church uses for its community garden. The garden contributes up to 1,000 pounds of fresh produce to local food pantries annually. Photo: Church Property Resource Hub

They've recently called a new pastor whom they are sharing with Dennison Lutheran Church and are collaborating with other rural parishes to sponsor an intern from Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

The Rev. Peter Coen-Tuff, interim pastor since July 2025, said he was inspired to take the call by seeing how the church was still serving and dreaming. "They had all these dying trees around their property, so they took them down and planted new ones," he said. "When you're planting trees, you're thinking about the future." This small congregation knows it can do big things!

Property Stewardship Lessons

- Small churches can have a big impact! List all the ways your church serves your members and neighbors to find out how far-reaching your ministries are.
- Folks beyond your congregation want to support you. Think about all the organizations, individuals and groups that have been touched by your church when you are fundraising for your building or another big project.
- We preserve more than buildings; we preserve sacred places. Our buildings and land make ministry possible. Good use of our property is as important as ensuring a stable structure.

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