

'I'M GLAD I'M HERE!'

"Wow, I am impressed!" were the first words out of my mouth as I stepped into the dining hall at Camp Hiawatha. The occasion was a training session for camp delegates and the third time over a period of decades that I had the opportunity to visit the camp.

The first time was years prior to the acquisition of the camp site which eventually resulted in the formation of Voyageurs Lutheran Ministry. Myself and another board member (details are lost in the mists of time) visited the camp site to ascertain if acquiring the site would be a viable option. The site was in a state of gloomy disrepair, much as Vermilion was prior to its purchase years earlier. The idea was dropped. A later board revisited the proposal; the two camp sites were joined forming the VLM. (There's an object lesson here.)

The second visit was during a church council retreat in the early '90s. Pastor Joe had recently come on board. Discussions, planning sessions and Bible studies were lead by Pastor Antti Lepisto. We met in the newly-built retreat center. Two memories stand out -- the extremes in temperature -- from the heat of the sauna to the bitter cold of that winter night. I tightened up my hooded parka as I stood in awe gazing up at the canopy of stars on a moonless night, feeling like a subatomic particle in the vastness and the majesty of God's creation. It was dead still, total silence as if life itself was frozen -- save for the crunch of the snow underfoot,

Both the soul and the body are fed in this building -- the chapel on the upper level with the dining hall beneath. The dining portion was . . . well . . . it needed a face lift and repairs, some if not all due to a health department edict.

Fast forward to May 7, 2010. Delegate Ben Johnson was unable to attend the training session and asked if I would go. Friday morning dawned cold and gloomy. I asked myself "Why am I doing this? Why did I say 'yes' after so many years doing "camp stuff?" Snow falling in the afternoon did not help. "Will it be cancelled?" "No!" I had called the camp office early in the week to confirm my attendance. I committed myself. Accompanied by wife, daughter and Betty Wolterstorf we made the journey.

Echoing Sarah Frakes as she reaches the top of a rock climb (WDIO commercial): "I'm glad I'm here."

Camp cook Jan Soltis went out of her way to prepare a delicious dinner-- roast beef, oven baked garlic potatoes, corn, beans, a fruit cobbler, ice cream, watermelon. And then to meet a former board member I had not seen for years. Our friendship goes back to the early '90s when I first met Myrna Peterson at an annual meeting of the corporation. Her life changed dramatically with an unfortunate accident. Now here she is again taking an active part as delegate coordinator for VLM. The meal in the remodeled facility and seeing her prompted me to say: "I'm glad I'm here." (There's an object lesson here.)

The VLM board met prior to dinner and the delegate session, setting the schedule back a bit. Dinner was late, our session was late, which worked out O.K. Singing around a campfire and devotions were scheduled but the weather not being suitable for outdoor activities dictated otherwise allowing for a little extra time to spend throwing around ideas and discussion between the seven delegates and staff members Joel, Julie and Myrna.

VLM has a new website: vlmcamps.org. It is now possible to go on line and with

a click of the mouse get a list of all congregations who are members of the corporation and their delegates, delegate information, staff profiles, camp schedules, programs, directions and history. Every time someone goes to www.goodsearch.com the camp earns a penny. \$146.21 has been earned as of May 7th -- enough to pay for a new sink in the retreat center. VLM also can earn up to \$4.00 for empty inkjet cartridges and toners -- no Epson. It was suggested at the session that special offering envelopes be made available for congregations to insert into Sunday bulletins and/or newsletters and entice members to contribute the \$3.00 corporate per/confirmed/member fee rather than taking it out of a budget that is financially challenged.

Fund raisers with the goal of receiving a matching amount from Thrivent no longer work. There is a "Care in Community" program through Thrivent is another source. VLM is on the list. VLM delegate Duane Long from Kenwood Lutheran is a Thrivent representative. Concordia and Gloria Dei of Duluth and Roseville Lutheran are new members of the VLM corporation and since the Synod Assembly several small churches have expressed a desire to join. Another training session is scheduled for the Fall.

The VLM tag line is "In God's Great North Woods." Attending an event at one of the camps is refreshing, a renewal, a chance to escape the brick and mortar environment and feel God's presence in a sanctuary where the ceiling is the heavenly expanse, the walls the majestic pines, the floor the earth beneath one's feet. "Why am I doing this?" Because!!

Jergen