

Published: September 14, 2002

Edition: METRO

Section: NEWS

Page#: 7B

For west metro churches, one move leads to another

By Martha Sawyer Allen

Staff Writer

The move of Grace Church from Edina into its new, massive worship house in Eden Prairie has set off a domino-like affect involving two other south metro congregations, three church buildings and a parochial school.

After the dust settled, **Calvary Christian Reformed Church** left its Bloomington home at 8901 France Av. S. and is now using Grace Church's former building at 5300 France Av. Oak Hill Lutheran Brethren Church, which was in Bloomington at 8101 Xerxes Av. S., took over Calvary's former space. And Calvary Christian Middle School is leasing part of the Grace building for some needed expansion.

It's all about getting bigger. Grace has built the largest worship space in the Twin Cities, and the other congregations have doubled their space by their moves.

Oak Hill took possession of the Calvary building in August and is already renovating. Services will start soon. According to a release from the church, the new facility "will provide a 100 percent increase in seating capacity and will more than double fellowship and classroom space." Oak Hill also bought a house at 90th and France Av. S. as housing for some young men who will operate and maintain the house while assisting in various ministries and programs of the congregation.

Oak Hill is going from a worship space that seats about 200 people to one that seats 400, and Calvary Reformed is moving from 400 seats to more than 950. Grace moved from its 950-seat sanctuary to one seating 4,500. Its first public worship service will be Sunday.

The Rev. Jim Rightler, Grace's executive pastor, said the congregation's building on France was never officially on the market.

"We wanted to control who bought it, to prevent some cult from getting in," he said. "We are delighted that Calvary . . . bought it. We know they will continue good ministry."

Calvary's staff members have been sharing the building with their Grace counterparts for several weeks, while Grace scrambled to finish its office space at its new site.

The Rev. Roger Kramer, senior pastor at Calvary, said that his congregation was considering plans to add 30,000 square feet onto its building of 14,000 square feet. It would have cost \$4.2 million. But then they heard that Grace was available for \$6 million. They could sell their building for \$2.1 million, which meant they got 128,000 square feet at Grace, with more than 7 acres of land, for basically what it would cost to expand on their site.

"It was financially a kind of no-brainer," he said.

For the three congregations the moves were "equally exciting," he said. "For all of us it's an opportunity to grow our ministries. I see it all as a 'God moment.' God's providing our needs in a timely way, but beyond our reach and expectations."

The congregation worried a bit about the cost of maintaining a much larger site, he said, but then Calvin Christian Middle School in Edina was looking for a way to expand and it leased part of the Grace building. "They were under the gun to expand their facilities, and now they can slow down a bit," Kramer said.