

Bethphage and Mosaic: From Beginnings to Global Impact
Linda Timmons, Mosaic President and CEO

I am honored to be able to bring greetings to you on behalf of Mosaic, formerly known as Bethphage and Martin Luther Homes. We are thrilled to host this festival in Nebraska and I know that the more than 50 people who participated in the pre-festival tour of ministries enjoyed visiting Lutheran Family Services, Immanuel Village and Mosaic. We are all good partners.

Last year, 2013, Mosaic celebrated 100 years of service with the theme, “A Century of Service, A Legacy of Love.” We had some grand celebrations to mark that occasion. In February, through the wonder of modern technology, we kicked off the centennial simultaneously with all of our locations across the United States.

In June, we celebrated with more than 400 people at Axtell, the birthplace of Mosaic as Bethphage. And in October, we celebrated with more than 600 people at a Gala in Omaha, which featured Timothy Shriver, CEO of Special Olympics as our guest speaker.

Along the way we had many smaller, fun events – like the “Battle of the Batter” cake decorating contest that drew a surprisingly large number of contestants (which, for us church people for whom food is a staple at every event, was a pretty good thing!).

Throughout the celebrations, we acknowledged our faith heritage, of which the Augustana Synod played a large role. I am confident that Bethphage would not have known the success it did, had it not had the Augustana Church supporting it with prayer, people and gifts.

Even today, now that Bethphage and Martin Luther Home (another organization founded in the Lutheran Church) are united as Mosaic for nearly 11 years, our ties to the Augustana Synod are strong. So I am grateful to be here with you.

I was last with you at Gustavus Adolphus College in 2012. Since our ties to the Augustana Synod are strong, I’m just curious as I look out on this gathering. Raise your hand if you have visited any Mosaic location across the country, whether it was our campus in Axtell or by attending an event at any of our locations in Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Arizona, Texas, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Connecticut or Delaware. Raise your hand if someone from your family worked at or maybe received services through Bethphage or Mosaic, or maybe you yourself worked there or visited campus as a summer retreat. Raise your hand if you have remembered our needs in your prayers. Our ties to the Augustana Synod are indeed strong!

A few weeks ago, we introduced our “Forward in Faith” vision that will guide Mosaic for the next several years. In giving it a title, we clearly stand in the tradition of Pastor K.G. William Dahl, the founder of Bethphage, and the many faith-filled people who have gone before us in this ministry.

Forward in Faith is our vision as we begin our second century of service. We want to make clear that we live in faith. Faith is not certainty; there are so many things outside of our control. But we know that it has been the guidance of the Holy Spirit that has brought us to this moment and that

same Spirit will guide our future. So today, in 2014 at 101 years old, we move forward in faith because we know that what we do is too important not to do. The people we serve, their families, our staff, communities where we serve and the Church all need us – you see, for 101 years, we have responded to God’s call to serve.

We are grateful for those who have served so faithfully; yet we also want to acknowledge that we must move forward – times do change! Yet, it seems that in some ways, our past is our future. During our centennial, we routinely said we were looking back with gratitude and forward with faith.

You know, that little community of Bethphage in the village of Axtell did a lot of things right. Pastor Dahl’s vision for Bethphage was that it be a place where everyone was accepted. He welcomed people with epilepsy, people who had no other home, people whose disabilities left them disfigured or unable to speak, people who needed someone to remind them that they are lovable. That early Bethphage was a place where everyone came together as a community and helped one another. The people who came there to live experienced hospitality based in love, not hostility because they were different.

As I sat in Home Tabor, our museum in Axtell, and pored through our archives, I could read the stories of those who came for care, the families of those who decided to place a loved one in a home, and the faithful friends who provided much needed support. They are humbling stories to read.

The concept of a welcoming community that values differences and welcomes the stranger and those who are not like us – the concept around which Bethphage was built – is finally making inroads into communities today. The world is finally catching up with the Bethphage of 101 years ago! For more than 30 years, we’ve been helping make communities beyond our own campuses more welcoming places by providing homes for people with disabilities in communities and helping people become involved. Today our mission message is that we partner with people to create meaningful lives in caring communities, giving a voice to their needs. It is nothing different than what we’ve been doing for 100 years.

I think the story of David Wilson is a good one to share about this. David was a young boy – only 10 years old – when his mother, Beatrice (whom many of you may have known), brought him to live with us at Axtell. She remembers summer trips to see him from her home when he would run after her car as she drove away – hard for mother and son! David had many friends when he lived on our campus. Then he moved into Omaha and eventually moved into a host home, which is like a foster home situation. David was out and about, enjoying life. At his church, the pastor knew that David wanted to kiss each newly baptized baby on the forehead. David was well-known at the places he frequented, the restaurants and bank.

David and his family were touched by the ministry of Bethphage. David then touched many people himself through his life in the community. In fact, when David died unexpectedly, the church was full with friends wanting to attend his funeral to celebrate a life well lived. This is what our work has been about from the beginning – helping people find loving homes where they are accepted and can become all God wants them to be. Because of the advocacy of Mosaic and organizations like us, the world is changing for people as all people find a more welcoming reception, even when they’re

different. That's part of the GLOBAL IMPACT of our mission.

Another story, another man named Davey, tells a piece of this as well. This Davey was abused by his father when he was a young child causing him permanent brain damage. He spent most of his adult life in an institution until about five years ago when he moved into one of our community homes. He was so proud to have his own room and have his own things. He died recently and his sister stood at his funeral and thanked Mosaic, saying that his last five years were his best five years because Mosaic gave him love and life. That is part of the GLOBAL IMPACT of our mission.

Stories like that can be repeated across the more than 200 communities in the United States where you find Mosaic services today. We serve more than 3,700 people. But it all began in that little prairie town of Axtell, Nebraska on a windswept little rise that the locals called 'the hill' north of town. It's an amazing story of humble beginnings, faith-filled people and lot of prayer and hard work. I grew up in that little town, and my first job was at Bethphage, so I know that story well.

But our impact has gone beyond the people we serve directly. People from Mosaic have served on national and international organizations to help shape the guidelines for what quality services to people should look like. Staff members from Mosaic have been on boards and committees to help find solutions for housing, transportation, education, jobs training – pretty much every area of life. We've been there to advocate for people with disabilities so that they can know whole lives.

We also help people advocate for themselves. In southwestern Kansas, an 82-year-old woman named Alice makes trips to Topeka to visit with legislators and tell them about her needs – the needs of someone with disabilities. They listen to her; she, like so many people of her age with disabilities, spent far too many years in institutions and she has strong feelings about her rights. We fully support her to do that. Again, that is a part of the GLOBAL IMPACT of Bethphage and Mosaic.

Beyond the United States, we have been blessed to have opportunities to change lives as well. Back in the 1990s, we worked to establish a Bethphage in the United Kingdom. We were given an opportunity to present a bid to establish services there and we were chosen. In just a couple of weeks, that organization is celebrating its 20th anniversary and it is a recognized leader in England for creatively serving people with disabilities. Yes, even though the Bethphage name is a memory here now that we've become Mosaic, it lives on at Bethphage Great Britain. It truly was an honor to Bethphage's reputation that a small organization from the Midwest was chosen to open services abroad. That is another piece of the GLOBAL IMPACT of Bethphage.

You can see that while we're about providing the services that people need to live a whole life, we're also focused on changing attitudes – even changing cultures – so that a whole life will include being welcomed as part of a larger community. We've seen that at work in the United States and other Western nations for the last 30 years or so. But in other places around the world, the concept of welcoming people who have disabilities is still somewhat new.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union more than 20 years ago, we were asked to help people in Latvia determine how best to use their limited resources to help people with disabilities. Officially, during the Soviet era, people with disabilities did not exist so there was no need to help provide them

with anything. After the fall, suddenly they existed and had needs. We helped get things going.

We're now working with an international alliance, called IMPACT, to help create services for people with disabilities in other places. This work is truly inspiring! It is great missional work. We partner with local non-governmental organizations to find ways to serve people with disabilities. This work is all donor supported and we provide training, support and expertise, but set a time frame during which we help the local organization become financially independent from us.

Around 2002, we met up with Cristian Ispas, who runs a group named Motivation Romania in Romania. Their mission was to help train young adults who had become quadriplegics or paraplegics to become as independent as possible. Part of their work included creating customized wheelchairs for people. At first we worked to get customized wheelchairs for children with disabilities who were living in institutions. Then the project grew to where we worked with them to take children from the institutions and help them live whole lives.

Imagine in your mind what you think an eastern European communist-built institution for children might look like. Crib after crib of unattended children with little clothing, no interaction and no one who cares. Together, Mosaic and Motivation Romania took more than 30 children from that institution and helped them find new lives where people cared. Many of those children are now moving into young adulthood and do things that, years ago, no one would have dreamed possible.

I could tell you story after story about the children. We've come to know many of them by first name, even if we've never met them! They are people like Georgiana who is now a young teenager. She was abandoned by her family after an accident when she was 3 left her unable to do anything on her own. Luckily she spent only two years in the institution before Motivation Romania gave her a home. She had received no therapy and didn't even have a wheelchair that fit her in the institution. That's all changed now and she has people who won't abandon her just because she cannot take care of herself. There is another piece of the GLOBAL IMPACT of Bethphage and Mosaic.

We're also involved an exciting program today with the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Here, again, we're not just working to help provide services for children where nothing is available, but we're working to change a culture that has considered disabilities to be a curse from God upon a family. We've created small educational centers and trained women to be para-educators. So welcome are our services that we now serve more than twice the number of children we originally hoped to.

I could go on about the really great other things we're doing there to help not just children with disabilities, but their families move ahead. We've created a micro-lending program that has helped people start their own little business, cooperatives that help people market and sell goods they produce, a health-care program that has virtually stopped the children we serve from dying untimely deaths because of preventable illnesses. This is another piece of the GLOBAL IMPACT of Bethphage and Mosaic.

Pastor Dahl lived a far-too-short life, dying at age 34, only four years after the founding of Bethphage Mission. The fact that the mission survived and thrived is a testament to the support and

prayers of the Augustana Synod. Bethphage has had a global impact because the Augustana Synod had always been a socially minded, globally thinking church body. In his short life, Pastor Dahl had great dreams about what Bethphage would become. I do not believe he would have imagined the societal, technological and cultural changes that we know that have made his dream take a different form than he could envision. But he dreamed big.

It would not surprise him to know that Bethphage has made an impact beyond Nebraska, beyond the United States, beyond the Church itself. But we are called to be leaven in the loaf, to impact the world and share Christ's love manifest as care for one another.

I've been talking about the GLOBAL IMPACT of Bethphage, but we're going beyond that as well. Pastor Dahl's great-grandson and namesake, Kjell Lindgren, is an astronaut with NASA. He attended our Centennial Festival in Axtell last summer and recently asked for a Bethphage memento he could take into space when he goes to the international space station in 2015. We will happily oblige and are sending a small part of Bethphage history with the Bible verse Pastor Dahl loved: Remember them that are in chains (Hebrews 13:3). Global impact and beyond!

As part of our preparations for our Centennial, we created and shared a video titled "Perfect Day." It is a nice overview of what's happening today at Mosaic. I want to share it with you. It shares how that small start has changed lives.

VIDEO HERE (available on Mosaic's website at www.mosaicinfo.org).

Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you this morning. Bethphage, now Mosaic, was born of the Augustana Synod. It has taken a path that only God could know. Moving forward in faith, we know that God will continue to guide this ministry. We are just beginning our second century of service and I am emboldened by a line from the biblical book of the Prophet Jeremiah. It is from chapter 29, verse 11: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

May we all trust in those words!