

Rev. Richard M. Koehneke Retires From Holy Cross After 38 Years in Pastoral Ministry

By Paul Zilz

Rev. Richard M. Koehneke will retire as Senior Pastor at Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, IN on July 31, 2009, after having served 38 years in the pastoral ministry. He will preach his last sermon as Senior Pastor at Holy Cross during the weekend of June 13th and a congregation dinner will be held in his honor at Goeglein's on June 14th.

Rev. Koehneke has served as Senior Pastor of Holy Cross since 1993. In recalling what led him to accept the call to Holy Cross, Rev. Koehneke remarks, "It seemed to me that the Lord was giving me the opportunity to take what I had learned up to that time in 22 years in pastoral ministry and apply it on a larger scale, so that I could accomplish more in His service and for His kingdom – often by equipping and sending rather than doing it myself."

Reflecting on the purpose and joy of ministry, he continues by saying "I think that ministry is all about being productive in the Lord's service, and true joy in ministry is when my gifts match the needs of those I serve. I sensed that was the case when I was called to Holy Cross, and I hope it has proven to be true." Indeed, such a humble response hides the depth of just how much his partners in the Gospel at Holy Cross have been blessed through his pastoral leadership over the last 16 years.

Rev. Mark Neubacher, Pastor of Care at Holy Cross, remarks how Pastor Koehneke has "a deep knowledge of the Scriptures and the original languages" and is "a great communicator of the Gospel in his preaching and teaching." Mike Plank, congregation president, adds that Pastor Koehneke has a gift of being able "to take complex Biblical concepts and put them into simple and understandable explanations. He always comes up with creative acronyms to help me remember Biblical concepts."

Rev. Daniel May, President of the Indiana District - LCMS concurs, noting "Pastor Koehneke is a strong and compassionate proclaimer of the Gospel. His preaching and teaching have been exceptional." Rev. Dr. Dean Wenthe, President of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN is a former classmate of Pastor Koehneke from 1965 through 1971 at Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, IN and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO. He adds, "From his youth, Pastor Koehneke has been a talented communicator and an extraordinary musician."

Many congregation members note that through his spiritual wisdom and exceptional preaching and teaching, Pastor Koehneke has equipped God's people by helping them grow in spiritual maturity as he led the entire Holy Cross ministry team "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Ephesians 4:12). Throughout his ministry at Holy Cross, Pastor Koehneke has equipped his partners in the Gospel by preaching, teaching and modeling that God's gift to us as Spirit-empowered disciples of Christ is that we are called and transformed by the Holy Spirit to live as faithful, fruitful, followers and friends of Jesus.

Indeed, Holy Cross members will tell you how Pastor Koehneke has given them a deeper appreciation of the depth and breadth of God's truth and how it applies on a daily basis as we live as God's people in a culture whose worldview is opposed to God's truth. He consistently and articulately teaches how our Spirit-empowered faith is not static, but dynamic and life-changing and how we experience joy and God's blessing as we focus on Christ using Scripture to discern God's truth and His will and purpose in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Rev. Koehneke's family background and education have contributed to his love of ministry and the impact he has had for Jesus on so many lives. His father Rev. Martin Koehneke and mother Irma (Knippa) Koehneke were instrumental in shaping his thoughts, direction and spiritual maturity along with those of his older sister Barbara and two younger sisters, Janice and Kathleen. Having served as a parish pastor in Texas for 11 years, Pastor Koehneke's father later went on to serve as president of Concordia Teachers College in River Forest from 1954-1972 and as Senior Vice-President for Fraternal Operations for Aid Association for Lutherans (now Thrivent Financial) from 1972 until his retirement in 1981. The bond between father and son grew stronger and stronger throughout the years. Rev. Koehneke reflects he really enjoyed developing a deep relationship with his father, noting that after his father retired, "we were really blessed to have 14 years to really get to know each other in his retirement prior to his death in 1995 at age 79." He says his father "taught me the value of thinking

clearly and precisely, and also the importance of asking good questions if you want to get good answers". He adds with a smile, "not that I always do either one of those things by any means."

His mother served as a "great mentor" to Rev. Koehneke during his growing up years in Texas and later in Chicago. Koehneke adds "in many ways she still is, second only to (my wife) Mary." He and Mary (Reitz) of Buffalo, NY were married in 1971, after Rev. Koehneke had obtained an Associate of Arts degree in 1965 from Concordia Lutheran Junior College in Ann Arbor, MI, a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1967 from Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, IN and a Master of Divinity degree in 1971 from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, MO.

Rev. Koehneke overflows with love for his wife Mary as he is grateful for the depth of her love and wisdom throughout their marriage. In speaking about Mary's background, he states "she was in New Guinea for two years, 1967-1969, as a missionary teacher. She taught the children of the LC-MS missionaries there. Then she taught for two years in Salt Lake City Schools, and then we got married in 1971 and moved to Kannapolis, North Carolina, where she taught for four years in Kannapolis City Schools before we started having children. In her third year of teaching in Kannapolis she was named Teacher of the Year – quite an accomplishment for an "outsider" and "Yankee" to boot!"

Pastor Koehneke served the parish of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in Kannapolis from 1971-1977. While they served in Kannapolis, their son Steve was born. Having been graduated from Concordia Lutheran High School and later from Ball State, Steve went on to complete his Master in Library and Information Science from Indiana University and lives in Fort Wayne. Steve serves Holy Cross in several ways, including serving as an occasional Worship Singer at the Saturday evening contemporary worship service.

In 1977, Pastor Koehneke accepted a call as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Hyattsville, MD and served at Redeemer from 1977-1982. During this time, he also served as a member of the Long Range Planning and Budgeting Team in the Southeastern District. In 1979, he coordinated the long range planning process used by more than 600 participants at the Southeastern District 40th Anniversary Convocation, setting major directions for the District for the next five to ten years.

Rev. Koehneke and Mary were blessed with another son, Brian, during this time as well. Having been graduated from Concordia Lutheran High School and completing coursework at IPFW, Brian has participated in mission trips to Angola (Africa), Brazil, Bulgaria and the Palestinian Territories. He currently works for Bethesda Lutheran Homes in Fort Wayne as a supported living assistant, helping developmentally disabled men in a small group home. He is involved in various Bible studies, mission work, music and worship activities and youth ministry in various places in and around Fort Wayne. He also serves as one of the mentors in Holy Cross' confirmation ministry.

From 1982-1993, Rev. Koehneke served as pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Ridgewood, NJ. While in New Jersey, Rev. Koehneke also served as Second Vice President of the New Jersey District from 1988-1991 before serving as First Vice President of the New Jersey District from 1991-1993.

Pastor Koehneke's diverse God-given talents and Spirit-empowered gifts have enabled him to serve God's people throughout the church at-large. Consistent with his love for and spiritual gifts of preaching and teaching, Rev. Koehneke has served as one of the regular preachers on Worship for Shut-Ins for 15 years. In the late 1990's he also served as Pastoral Advisor/Leader to Lutheran Hour Ministries' northeast Indiana "Living for Tomorrow" television outreach and evangelism effort involving numerous churches throughout northeast Indiana.

Pastor Neubacher notes that Pastor Koehneke has served as a "good mentor for those new to the pastoral office and for field workers." Reflecting Pastor Koehneke's love for ministry and for those serving in ministry, he has served since 2001 as a member of the Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support (LC-MS). From 1998-2001, he also served as a PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support) Facilitator for the Commission on Ministerial Growth and Support. The PALS program is designed to support the learning process and to facilitate the transition of new pastors and wives from seminary life to parish ministry.

Remarkably, since 1982 Rev. Koehneke has supervised ten vicars, two Director of Christian Education interns and thirty seminarians in field education. Since 2001, Rev. Koehneke has served as a mentor pastor for the Pastoral Leadership Institute. PLI provides advanced leadership training for pastors who have exhibited potential for leadership excellence and helps form pastoral leaders around the world.

Summarizing Pastor Koehneke's humble attitude to serving in ministry, Pastor Neubacher praises Pastor Koehneke's "servant attitude to his work for the work of Christ's Church and his sacrifice he has made of his time" for the welfare of God's people. Mike Plank commends Pastor Koehneke for "his deep love of Jesus and his demonstrated faith." Pastor Koehneke states "the truth is that there is almost nothing about pastoral ministry that I do not enjoy. I consider myself extremely blessed to be able to say that about my life's work."

In reflecting on the joy of ministry, Koehneke says the highlights are "having the daily opportunity to be in the company of the people of God who are striving to serve the Lord faithfully and joyfully in a world that is difficult and dangerous to Christian faith...having the frequent opportunity to touch lives with the love and truth of Jesus Christ at times of great joy and intense pain...and being given the constant opportunity to teach and preach the Word of God to the people of God so that together we can continue to grow more and more into full Christ-like maturity, making a Christ-like difference in a world in desperate need of Jesus Christ."

Indiana District President Rev. Daniel May insightfully comments, "The heart of Pastor Koehneke's ministry has been his own shepherd's heart. He cares for and about people in his words and actions. He is a faithful student of the Bible and a good friend and brother in Christ!" Rev. Dr. Dean Wenthe affirms that Pastor Koehneke's "love for the Lord and his kindness toward all are transparent and a wonderful blessing." In talking with the people of Holy Cross, one indeed senses the deep and abiding love existing between Pastor Koehneke and his partners in the Gospel.

Commenting on Pastor Koehneke's capable leadership, President May says "His engaging leadership has led the congregation to a local and global mission vision that is encouraging and effective." Additionally, Pastor Neubacher commends Pastor Koehneke on "putting together a good ministry team and caring for them and having standards for high quality in every area."

Accordingly, Pastor Koehneke has developed a dynamic ministry leadership team consisting of talented and gifted people with a passion for equipping and sending God's people to make a Christ-like difference in the world. The Holy Cross mission and ministry leadership team includes Rev. Dr. Larry Merino as Pastor of Outreach, Rev. Mark Neubacher as Pastor of Care, Cecily Chandler as School Administrator, Chad Van Meter as Minister of Discipleship, Ken Rogner as Minister of Music and Mark Lange as Executive Director.

Discussing Pastor Koehneke's conscientious leadership style, District President Daniel May adds that Pastor Koehneke "is thoughtful and thorough in his daily work and gives insight and direction to those on his staff and those serving in elected positions." While the complexity of leading a larger congregation with many diverse mission and ministry activities could be overwhelming to some, Rev. Dr. Larry Merino, Pastor of Outreach at Holy Cross, commends Pastor Koehneke on "bringing an excellent gift of attention to details."

Through Pastor Koehneke's gifted leadership, his strong emphasis on pursuing excellence and his consistent attention to details as well as the pledges and gifts of many Holy Cross members and the generosity of the Lutheran Foundation, Holy Cross recently completed a \$3.2MM renovation and expansion of its school ministry and church facilities. The church added a large and inviting Welcome Center, significantly renovated the expansive school facilities and added a science laboratory classroom and a new computer classroom with many advanced technical features to achieve an even higher quality learning and teaching environment. Understanding the Church is built on Christ as the Church's foundation, Pastor Koehneke sees this project in spiritual terms, seeing the excellent facilities as blessings provided by God through His people as a means to accomplish mission and ministry, reaching out to others with the saving and healing words of the Gospel and teaching them the life-changing truth of God's Word.

No discussion of Rev. Koehneke's service in ministry would be complete without extolling the creative talent and leadership with which God has blessed him in the area of worship and music. He has composed several orders of service, hymns and songs, with several being used in worship at various times at Holy Cross. Also, he has served as editor of "Hymns for Now, Vol. 3". Additionally, he has composed music for two published stage productions.

President Daniel May exclaims, "His worship leadership has been further enhanced by his musical talent!" Even during his first call as pastor in Kannapolis, NC, Pastor Koehneke accompanied the Gospel choir on piano. Throughout his years of ministry in Fort Wayne, Pastor Koehneke has played keyboard with a group of musicians from Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Suburban Bethlehem Lutheran Church and New Life Lutheran Church, enhancing the Advent Season for both Holy Cross and Bethlehem with a favorite Christmas Carol service conducted in a jazz format. His latest ministry focus at Holy Cross has been to serve in leadership and administration, preaching and teaching and worship and music. In fact, Holy Cross has been consistently blessed over the years to have Saturday evening worship led by Pastor Koehneke on the keyboard or piano with various ensembles and groups of singers.

Reflecting on retirement, Pastor Koehneke said he and Mary "are looking forward simply to being together, in whatever form or activity that may take. I'm really looking forward, God-willing, to making the most of this new season of freedom and flexibility – which is the way I choose to define retirement." Since he has been recognized as a good golf partner, perhaps some time will be spent on the links.

Pastor Koehneke continues by saying "our years at Holy Cross have been rich with wonderful experiences among an amazing group of partners in the Gospel. We carry with us many beautiful memories."

In addressing his beloved partners in the Gospel at Holy Cross, Pastor Koehneke quotes from the Bible, saying "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." (Philippians 2:3-5). As we all move forward into the various futures that God has in mind for us, as we consider, ponder and wonder what will happen next, the Word of God that comes to my mind is the Scripture that my father used as the text for the sermon that he preached at my installation at Holy Cross on November 28, 1993: "Now to Him who by His power at work within us is able to do immeasurably more than all that we ask or imagine, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations, forever and ever. Amen!" (Ephesians 3:20-21)."

Truly, Holy Cross has been blessed by God over the last sixteen years with the service of Rev. Richard M. Koehneke as Senior Pastor and, in turn, it seeks to be a blessing to others. His partners in the Gospel rejoice with him and Mary as he steps into this "new season of freedom and flexibility." Praise God for our partnership in the Gospel!