

Former St. Philip leader off to Illinois

By Virginia Culver

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Dec. 16, 2000 - The Rev. Don Marxhausen has a new job, and his former congregation is "on the road to healing," said the minister who is temporarily serving St. Philip Lutheran Church in Littleton.

Marxhausen, who became a highly visible clergyman after the Columbine shootings, will move to the Chicago area this month to become associate pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Clarendon Hills, Illinois. He will become senior pastor there next summer.

Marxhausen, 60, left St. Philip in August after months of tension in the 900-member Littleton congregation. He blamed much of the tension on the time he spent with Columbine families and the fact he officiated at the Dylan Klebold funeral. Klebold and Eric Harris were the students who shot 13 people and then committed suicide at Columbine High School in April 1999. Also, the congregation was going through a \$1.7 million expansion of its facilities and Marxhausen took a pre-planned leave in the months after Columbine.

Turmoil among Marxhausen and the congregation and its leaders, and among congregation members, ensued. A mediator was brought in, but was unable to resolve the issues. So Marxhausen resigned "to avoid a bloodbath," he said at the time.

The Rev. Paul Schairer, whose "forte is serving troubled congregations," said he was hired to take over the job for six to 18 months and begin putting things back together.

He said when a congregation goes through turmoil, or when it grieves the loss of a longtime, popular minister, trouble follows because people need time to heal from the loss and from the divisions before they can accept a new leader.

The relationship between any pastor and his or her congregants is unlike any other situation, Schairer said. "The pastor deals with people's most intimate issues: baptisms, funerals, weddings, power struggles."

Schairer said he doesn't believe the Columbine involvement was the issue that drove a wedge between Marxhausen and some of his congregation. "There were other problems. That was just the straw that broke the camel's back."

Schairer has held 21 small-group discussions with St. Philip members, giving them a chance to air their grievances and pain. About 40 percent of the congregation has attended. Many people have strong feelings, having either wanted Marxhausen to leave or to stay. The more involved people are with their church, the more likely they are to get involved in the politics of it, Schairer said.

Marxhausen was a social worker in Chicago before becoming a minister at the age of 37. He said he and his wife, Judith, who works with mentally handicapped children, would prefer to stay here, "but my notoriety and my age" limited the offers. "We will miss our friends here and our son will still be here," he said. The support of St. Philip members and clergy friends "have helped me start to heal," he said.

He has continued to minister to the Klebolds, who at one time attended St. Philip. He said Friday he doesn't know who their clergyperson will be when he leaves.