

Pastor learns about his community by walking the Lancaster city streets for Lent



EARLE CORNELIUS | Staff Writer
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The Rev. Todd Friesen walks on Zook Avenue to complete his Lenten challenge.

You can learn a lot at 3 miles an hour.

Just ask the Rev. Todd Friesen, pastor at East Chestnut Street Mennonite Church.

Friesen enjoys walking. The Elkhart, Indiana, native has been taking strolls throughout his East Orange Street neighborhood since he, his wife, Dennette Alwine, and their daughter, Jasmine, moved here in 2013.

But it was an Ash Wednesday reading in which the prophet Isaiah talks about the streets of the city that got him thinking.

“Something just spoke to me. What if I walked the streets of the city?” he asked himself.

He said a favorite verse of his is 1 John 2:6 “which calls us to ‘walk as Jesus walked.’ ”

‘Take up something’

Coupled with worship leader Judy Zimmerman Herr’s call for the congregation to either “give up something” or “take up something” during Lent, Friesen made it a goal to walk every street in Lancaster city.

He counted the streets he had covered the previous two weeks and began to add to it.

At the end of Holy Week, he walked Zook Avenue — a short block between East Frederick Street and Reynolds Avenue near Lancaster Cemetery — thus completing a walk that literally included almost everything from A to Z. Almost, he said, because he couldn’t find a street within city limits that begins with the letter Y.

He created a master map of city streets and would map out a new loop the night before walking.

Friesen didn’t walk every day, but Sundays became prime time.

“On Sunday afternoons, a preacher needs to decompress,” he said. “And so, on Sunday afternoons, I would take three-hour walks.”

When he finished his walk, he would post photos on Facebook, and members of the congregation would tell him they lived there or worked there or had grown up on that street.

“It opened up stories about people’s lives,” he said. By the time he finished his Lenten walks, eight members of the congregation had joined him.

Friesen admitted that, in some ways, he was preaching to the choir. Several members of the congregation have walked the Camino de Santiago — the Spanish path taken by St. James — and another couple had walked the Appalachian Trail. Furthermore, a significant portion of the congregation walks to the church.

When he moved to Lancaster, people told him not to venture south of King Street. That didn’t stop him.

“What we are familiar with, we are less fearful about,” he said. “So for me, it was a desire to become more familiar with the city.”

He found people in all four quadrants of the city welcoming and friendly and open to conversation.

Slowing down

Walking, he said, forces people to slow down and to observe and listen. He would overhear snippets of conversations. He recalled two instances in particular. One involved two people talking about an overdose victim; the other was a man talking on his cellphone about the brokenness in his life. The conversations prompted him to pray for those whose stories he had just overheard.

“I believe the more we walk, the more we strengthen the social fabric in the city.”

His treks, he said, reminded him of Jesus’ walk on the road to Emmaus and the significant interactions he had with people along the way.

“All of that conversation happens when they’re going together,” he said.

And that led him to cite the work of John Paul Lederach, a professor of conflict transformation at the University of Notre Dame, who often sends students out on a walk.

“He said something happens when they are heading in the same direction together.”

Friesen initially planned out loops. But as he neared his goal, the colored streets he marked on his map began to resemble a jigsaw puzzle. It became a matter of retracing an old path to cover a street he previously had missed.

He also met up with members of the congregation who would join him.

“Invariably, I would save a loop that began at their home,” he said “and the beautiful thing was they could describe their neighborhood.”

He also gained an appreciation for the houses of worship that dot the city.

“I’ve heard about many churches in our city, but I didn’t know where they were.”

As he would pass a church or a social service agency, he would pray for their congregations and for their work.

Along the way, Friesen discovered that Lancaster is a very walkable city, and there are some wonderful streets where traffic is at a minimum.

He also credited LNP staff member Tim Buckwalter for sending him stories of his walks in the city. Buckwalter [wrote about walking city streets in 2016](#).

“I loved Virginia Avenue and ... George Street,” Friesen said, adding that he was taken by Pearl and Ruby streets. He also pointed out that Marion and Grant streets are pretty much pedestrian thoroughfares.

And that led him to ponder street names. In a city with streets named for royalty — King, Queen, Prince and Duke — and those named for fruits — Lemon and Orange — he asked, “What was going on here where you have Pearl and Ruby and Ocean?”

Friesen now can calculate how long it takes to get from point A to point B in Lancaster. And that, he said, means he often is more likely to walk than drive to certain places.

Although he no longer is compelled to fill in the blocks on his map, he still intends to walk.

“It connects me with the city in a way that I can’t completely explain.”