

Rochester Church Receives Minnesota Council for Quality Award

By Matt Russell

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In a first for a church in Minnesota and possibly in the country, Bethel Lutheran Church in Rochester has received statewide recognition for its systematic efforts to improve the way it operates. The church was given a Minnesota Council for Quality award last month based on criteria such as effectiveness of its leadership, the quality of its strategic planning, how well it focuses on the needs of the congregation and how effectively it analyzes the success of its programs.

Bethel Lutheran's operations-improvement program is similar in many ways to those first used by manufacturing companies in the mid-1980s and later adopted by education and health care organizations in the mid 1990s, said Brian Lassiter, president of the Minnesota Council for Quality. The Council is a private nonprofit group that promotes effective quality improvement practices. "My sense is they are cutting new ground" for churches, Lassiter said. He added that Bethel's work is already getting more churches around the state interested in how they can operate more efficiently and effectively.

Bethel Lutheran's quality improvement program has resulted in increased worship service attendance, donations and budget, said Chris Zabel, the church's administrator. Changes have found their way into worship services with an improved music program and more involvement of children, he said, adding that recent changes have made church members feel like they have a more effective voice in the church. "More and more people's needs are being identified and being met," Zabel said.

The quality award given to Bethel Lutheran was at the "advancement" level, the second-highest award given to an organization in the state this year by the Minnesota Council for Quality. Medtronic Energy and Component Center won the highest, or "achievement" award while Hubert Olson Elementary in Bloomington and Hearth and Home Technologies in Lakeville and also won awards at the advancement level. Central Minnesota Job and Training Services won a "commitment" award, which is a step below the advancement award. All five organizations that filled out 50-page applications and had their sites visited by a team of evaluators won Minnesota Council for Quality awards this year, but the Council has no obligation to give awards to organizations simply because they apply, Lassiter said. He added that Bethel Lutheran is the first church to apply for a state quality award in Minnesota and could be the first in the country to win such an award.

"We want to learn," Zabel said. "We want to see what we're doing well and what we can do better. We also want to be an encouragement for other churches."