

Church's approach gets gloria in excelsis

By Delma J. Francis, *Star Tribune Staff Writer*

A Rochester "business" has won a Minnesota Quality Award for its achievements and performance in 2002. Its product: souls for Christ. Bethel Lutheran Church is the first church in the state to win the award, which is generally given to traditional businesses that show quality and performance excellence.

"In fact, we believe that this is the first church in the country" to have won a quality award, modeled after the national award named for the late Malcolm Baldrige, a former U.S. commerce secretary, said Brian Lassiter. He is president of the Minnesota Council for Quality, which makes the award. Baldrige emphasized quality and performance excellence as a necessity in maintaining a competitive edge.

"It's kind of refreshing to see them approach" this concept, which was designed with businesses in mind, Lassiter said. "Bethel is blazing a trail and should be considered a role model for other churches desiring to improve their ministries," he added.

Bethel's road to the quality award began about four years ago, said church administrator Chris Zabel. "I read a book by Dr. Walt Kallestad called 'Total Quality Ministry,' and I thought, 'There are some good ideas there, embedding the principles of quality in our ministry and the programs offered.' The church council got on board with it."

The idea encountered some initial resistance from the church's 25 staff members, many of whom thought it was too businesslike, he said. But that changed when they started seeing the results. Zabel said the church started thinking more like a business, providing services and ministry for its members.

The most notable results, he said, have been increased worship attendance and program participation, greater employee satisfaction and an increase in giving -- both for the general budget and for benevolence.

The next logical step, he said, was "to get some feedback on how we're doing, how we can do it better." That's when the church submitted its new plan for doing business to the Minnesota Council for Quality. Its entry included a 10-page organization profile and a 50-page report on leadership, strategic planning, community focus, human resource focus, policies and procedures, and results.

"All along we knew this was cutting-edge, pioneering for a church," Zabel said. "If people learn nothing else, it's this: There's always a better way of doing things. Take the time to find out the needs of the people you serve and seek to meet those common-sense principles."

Lassiter will present the award at Bethel's Sunday morning services. Three businesses and a school also received awards in the advancement category.