100 Years Later, an Eerie Symmetry

Photo cutline:

*One effect of the 1918 flu pandemic was construction of an isolation unit behind Trinity Hospital. This 1925 photo also reveals a glimpse of the C.A. Johnson home, where the first patients were received while construction was underway.*

In 1922, the year Trinity Health was founded, health and healthcare services were on the minds of many. Fresh in the collective memory were two world events: World War I and the 1918 influenza pandemic, also known as the Spanish flu.

Fast forward to 2022. Trinity Health is at the threshold of another milestone – the opening of a new healthcare campus and medical district. What lingers in our combined memory? The coronavirus pandemic.

“The symmetry is unbelievable – almost eerie,” observed Jeffrey Verhey, MD, pulmonary and critical care physician and chairman of the Trinity Health Foundation.

Trinity’s founders accepted a huge responsibility when they set out to mobilize donors, form a governing structure, proceed with construction and recruit professional talent for a regional hospital. Such moves today would involve a needs assessment, feasibility studies and detailed business plan. But in his letter inviting communities to an organizational meeting, Rev. T.F. Gullixson said simply, “After the most careful consideration, the decision to establish a general hospital for the care of the sick and the training of nurses has been reached.”

“When you consider that Trinity Health was founded on the heels of a pandemic and a world war, it’s understandable that people were concerned about medical care,” Dr. Verhey said. “The leaders who created the vision and organized the mechanism that launched Trinity Hospital got together because they needed better healthcare for their people.”

It’s also relevant that Trinity’s founders were people of faith. In his 1924 address dedicating the hospital’s second unit, Rev. Gullixson noted: “The ministry of healing is the work of the Lord.”

It was always the intention that Trinity Hospital would serve as a regional care center – a modern medical facility that would raise the standard of healthcare delivery for the people of Northwest North Dakota and beyond. That aim is as relevant today as ever. Trinity’s new healthcare campus and medical district, which opens next year, will include a state-of-the-art, patient-centered hospital and outpatient center that will transform healthcare delivery to the region.

“We still are the regional care center for this part of the state,” Dr. Verhey noted. “We offer what I call soup-to-nuts care. We’re here to provide everything for everybody as much as we can. We can’t do everything, but we do the vast majority of things.” He added, “People in rural communities still deserve access to high quality healthcare.”

It does seem uncanny that Trinity Health is poised to enter its next century on the heels of another global pandemic, and the parallels don’t end there. While the Spanish flu triggered proposals to improve and modernize the healthcare system nationwide and locally, so has COVID-19 generated a rethinking about what it means to meet the healthcare needs of people.

“When you consider that all the movement and all of the trends have been toward outpatient care, what COVID has done is show us that hospitals are still needed,” Dr. Verhey said. “We still need hospitals to help the sick and ‘do the cares’ of people who need the kind of attention that only a hospital can provide.”

One-hundred years later, the mission hasn’t changed, it’s just been rekindled.