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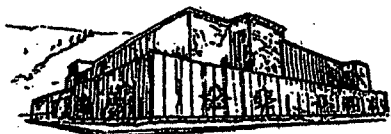
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The Rural Church at the Crossroads

by

Gregory J. Lemon

B.A. Eastern Oregon University, 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

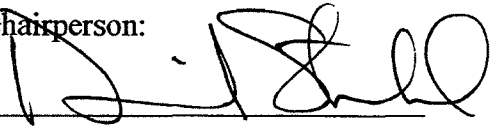
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Rural Churches at the Crossroads

Director: Sheri Venema 

Montana rural churches stand at a crossroads similar to many other rural institutions – post offices, cafés and schools. Many of these institutions depend on agriculture, and as it becomes more difficult for farmers to make a living, these towns continue to shrink. Many rural communities have existed in a state of perpetual depopulation ever since the land rush in the early 1900s, with the trend gaining momentum in recent years.

We know about this trend from the news, but there is little mentioned about churches. Many of them have closed. Many hold on by a tenuous thread of hope. Many are attended by congregations that are aging and dying.

Church leaders are concerned for these churches and have developed creative ways to keep them open. There is a rejuvenated focus on training the laity to help themselves. Churches are being yoked together, sometimes across denominational lines. Some churches are fortunate enough to have loyal pastors who focus on keeping church vital and meaningful for the small population they serve.

Many small, rural churches have a unique story and the churches portrayed in these articles are some examples of those stories.

Acknowledgements

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“How you stand here is important. How you
listen for the next things to happen. How you breathe.”

— William Stafford, *Being a Person*

“The truth, the whole truth, tends to be complex, its contentments
and joys wrestled out of doubt, pain, change.”

— Kathleen Norris, *Dakota*

Facing change: the crossroad for Montana's rural churches

Between Hilger and Winifred, Montana Highway 236 is mostly straight. The Judith Mountains rise in the east and the two peaks of the Moccasin Mountains stand guard to the west. In between is ranch country. Out here cattle is king and rangeland flanks both sides of the highway. The gray-green of the grass and sage mingles with fields of green winter wheat growing quickly. It is Easter weekend and spring rains have resurrected the land from the death grip of winter.

At Winifred the pavement stops. The highway continues northwest to Big Sandy, just southwest of Havre. On a map, the red line of Highway 236 gets thin at Winifred and stays that way for most of the stretch to Big Sandy. This part of the highway is gravel.

Winifred, with a population of about 175, is the only town within 50 miles for many of the ranchers. The school has 38 students, kindergarten through high school. A small grocery store, a couple of mechanics, three tire shops, two bars, a post office and the Central Montana Co-op represent the town's businesses. There are also two churches – three congregations – and their gravel parking lots and old wooden pews were full for their Easter services.

American Lutheran Church sits on top of a small hill on the northwestern edge of town, a white building with a small steeple and arched windows. The sanctuary was formerly the top of the Odd Fellows lodge; it was moved up the hill several years ago when the lodge closed. An addition to the back serves as a meeting hall and kitchen. On Easter morning nearly 70 people attended the service and the doors dividing the two rooms were propped open to accommodate the holiday crowd.

As people drifted into the church they filled the aisle, chatting with each other about recent rains and brandings. Even though church was supposed to start at 8 a.m., no one hurried.

After worshippers found their seats in the padded pews in the sanctuary or the folding chairs in the back, the Rev. Kathleen Phillips, with the help of three older children, brought forward the adornments for the altar. And then the congregation stood and sang "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today."

Rural churches in Montana are at a crossroads. Population in rural communities is declining as more people move to cities like Great Falls, Bozeman and Billings. This is particularly true east of the Continental Divide, where much of the rural culture centers on farming and ranching. Drought and drops in grain and beef prices have forced farmers and ranchers to sell out and move.

Congregation numbers in these towns mirror this change. Churches of all denominations have had to shut their doors. Presbyterians are combining congregations with Lutherans. Catholics share church buildings with Methodists. Many small-town pastors become spiritual leaders for an entire community. Churches in the state look

toward the pews for leadership as members shoulder more responsibility for keeping their churches open. Pastors serving multiple congregations have become the norm.

Churches in the midst of this change generally move in one of two directions, said Mary Jo Neitz, a sociologist at the University of Missouri. One response is to resist change. These congregations see change and struggle all around them but resist letting that affect them, said Neitz. Everything else might be changing but not their church, not if they can help it. The second response is more positive. Churches may work toward developing a community church where denominational lines are overlooked. Lay leadership in these churches is typically strong. The people in these churches become committed to each other, said Neitz.

At American Lutheran Church in Winifred, the church council, with Phillips' encouragement, has become more involved in the direction of the church. Council members are dedicated to keeping the church vital, said council member Shirley Benes.

"They realize that if they don't participate, the church won't be there," she said.

American Lutheran went nearly a year without a pastor before Phillips came, said Benes. Before Phillips, people didn't come as much as they do now. But with her dynamic personality and new ideas, people feel more involved now, she said.

It begins at the doors of the church, she said. Before Phillips, two or three regulars greeted people at the door. Now being a greeter is a shared responsibility. Four people, generally two couples, sign up for a month-long stint. This simple change has made the congregation feel more involved, said Benes.

The church council recently settled on the church's mission statement – a two-year process. Phillips was patient because she wanted the council to take the lead. It was

important for the council to determine its own direction and mission, she said. The mission statement reads: “Saved by grace, we are called by God to be a Christ-centered congregation who shares the Good News with all members of our community.”

This statement helps establish the direction and health of the church, said Phillips: “A congregation that’s healthy knows where it comes from and where it’s going.”

Working together to fulfill this mission is important, said Phillips, even on simple projects like the handicap ramp to the door of their church. It’s not only important to build a ramp, said Phillips; people need to understand that the ramp is part of the church’s ministry. The church still hasn’t decided how to put up the hand railing, but that’s in the works.

“We try very hard to keep our little church here,” said Benes.

But the effort to keep churches open is more difficult because of changes in rural communities.

Between 1990 and 2000, 21 of 56 Montana counties lost population. All but one of these counties are in the eastern part of the state.

The decline for many of the smaller farming communities began in the 1960s and ’70s. Farming became more mechanized and farms had to get bigger to make a profit, said Helen Waller, former candidate for lieutenant governor, founding member of the National Family Farm Coalition and a farmer near Circle, Mont.

The number of farms in the state neared its peak in 1920 at 57,677, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 1960 the number was down to 31,700. By 2000 there were 27,600 farms in the state. Many farmers were in debt when the farm crisis of the 1980s hit. This coincided with the beginning of the ongoing drought and a drop in grain prices.

Farmers who couldn't pay the climbing interest rates or withstand the drops in prices sold out, said Waller.

Price still drives many farmers out of business, said Waller.

Though production has doubled in the last 40 years, the price farmers get for a bushel of wheat today is about what they got in the mid-'60s, she said. When farmers leave a community, the town struggles. Many businesses – mechanics, tractor dealers and stores – depend on the farmers and ranchers. If the farmer can't make it, then neither will the town, she said.

Even if children want to come back and work the family farm, most farms won't produce enough income for two families. So they either start their own, which is difficult because of the debt it takes to get started, or go to the city, said Waller.

Between 1990 and 2000 the Catholic Church, the largest denomination in the state, lost 11 congregations in these 21 counties, but increased adherents by 1,634 people. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the second largest denomination in the state, lost only one congregation and 53 adherents in these 21 counties, according to Glenmary Research Center, a Catholic research house that compiles statistics on religions in America.

Churches are fighting to stay open, and though the Glenmary numbers seem to indicate growth in some denominations, those statistics are hard to believe in the smallest communities, where many people have to travel more than 30 miles to go to church and some of the old one-room churches are now just being used for storage. Many denominations are looking for ways to keep the church strong even if it doesn't grow.

In many small towns, where there are a few houses, a bar and cafe, post office and maybe a school, the church is one of the last remaining institutions. Its role is significant because it is holding on better than the small schools, where consolidation is becoming a trend.

In rural areas, people are more connected with church, said Cynthia Wooleaver, a sociologist of religion at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Church is important for a small town because congregations are made up of people who know each other well, she said. In a city, congregations tend to be segmented by different groups and interests. In rural communities, the people they see at the basketball game are the same people they see at church.

“During the week you’re interacting with the same group of people,” said Wooleaver.

The church often has roots dating back to the beginning of the town, because homesteaders carried their religion with them. Often the names that settled the town and started the church are still there today.

American Lutheran Church in Winifred was organized in 1929, because Lutheran pastors in Lewistown knew many of the ranchers settling in the area were Lutherans, according to the church history, written in 1979.

In a shrinking community, churches that are part of the town’s history tend to hold their numbers better, said Hugh Whitt, sociologist at the University of Nebraska. With young people and businesses leaving, the people who stay behind have the deepest roots in the community – they have the most invested, said Whitt. When they pass their church, more than a place to listen to a Sunday sermon they see the building where their

children were baptized, their parents married, and where their best friend is buried, said Whitt.

“The church is an institution different from many others because it is tied up with identity,” said Whitt.

Not only members, but communities as well, look to the church for guidance, he said. It is often where town meetings and celebrations are held. The church is where citizens seek solace and answers as making a living in their town becomes more difficult.

“I think for a lot of people it is a rock to which they can anchor,” said the Rev. Scott Hedegaard, a Lutheran pastor in Harlem, Mont.

To have a church building, Holy Family Catholic Church in Winifred combined with the local Methodist church. In the early 1970s Holy Family was meeting in a small brick building, formerly the old bank, and the Methodist church had burned. So the two congregations built a church together in 1975. The Methodists meet two Sundays a month and Holy Family meets each Sunday.

Holy Family has had to rely on people from the congregation in order to have services. The Catholic Church in Lewistown and the Rev. Dan O'Rourke, who comes out to Winifred on the first and third Sunday of each month, oversee Holy Family. But on Sundays when O'Rourke isn't there the service is essentially the same, except for the prayer before communion that only an ordained priest may say, said church pianist Diane Wickens, whose family ranches south of Winifred. The service in O'Rourke's absence is called “Word and Communion.”

Three members are trained to read homilies. Other members are trained to give communion and lead worship. The Catholic Diocese of Great Falls and Billings trains

Catholic laity in the eastern side of the state, which has kept Holy Family going, said Wickens.

Until recently there were two Catholic churches between Lewistown and Winifred: one in Hilger and one in Roy. Now both churches have closed, making Holy Family vital for its members who live north of town, some of whom drive nearly 30 miles to get to church. If Holy Family, closed they would have to drive to Lewistown, 37 miles to the south.

Sometimes O'Rourke isn't able to come out for his scheduled Sunday, but the church just carries on, said Wickens. When he is there, members of the congregation are still involved, helping serve communion and playing music. The member's participation in the service and the functions of the church has helped them grow in their faith, said Wickens.

"It makes you think about your faith more," she said.

During the week, the congregation takes responsibility for all other church functions: Bible school, potlucks and building upkeep. Wickens teaches 12 sixth graders in Bible school for an hour after school on Wednesdays. And when there is a funeral at the church, the congregation organizes a potluck.

Some churches have had to go further still.

Two hundred miles southwest of Winifred in White Sulphur Springs, the American Lutheran Church and First Presbyterian Church combined in the 1970s. Neither could afford a full-time pastor on their own, so they came to an agreement – they would be a "yoked" parish, meaning they would have one pastor to lead them both, either Lutheran or Presbyterian.

In the beginning each church kept separate buildings, and the pastor simply presided at two services each Sunday. During the 1990s they had a Lutheran pastor whose wife was ordained as well. Each pastor conducted separate Sunday services.

Initially there was some grumbling about being yoked, said Jean Ellison, the organ player for the Lutheran church. But now, everyone has come to accept that to keep going they have to be yoked.

White Sulphur Springs has struggled to keep up population, which now hovers around 1,000. When three sawmills closed in the 1990s, many people left town. The town faces the same challenges other ranching communities face, said Maggie Buckingham, who is treasurer of First Presbyterian Church council, president of the yoked parish council and whose family has a ranch outside of town.

As in many other places in eastern Montana, many of White Sulphur Springs' farmers and ranchers have sold to wealthier people from out of town, she said. Some older residents feel the old ways are threatened.

Things got much harder for the Presbyterian congregation three years ago when a prominent family of active members sold their ranch and moved away. The loss was difficult financially for the church, which was already struggling, said Buckingham. The Presbyterians couldn't afford to keep their building and two years ago sold it to a public television station. Since then the yoked parish has met together every Sunday in the Lutheran church. The service switches between the two denominational traditions every six weeks. When the change is made hymnals are switched and a different organist plays, but since the liturgy in both denominations is similar, the order of service doesn't change much.

Distinctions are still kept up, mostly for the older members of the congregation, who believe it is important to keep the line between the two congregations in place, said Buckingham.

“It’s been the family tradition for 150 years to be Presbyterian and you don’t give that up lightly,” said Neva Lou Johnston, Buckingham’s mother, who has lived in the area her whole life.

Ellison feels the same way: “I would not want to be transformed, because Lutheranism is my faith, and I think the Presbyterians feel the same way.”

Both denominations have their own ladies aid club, which put on events like bake sales. Separate church councils deal with administrative issues. But there is also a joint council, which deals with the administration of the yoked church. From the collection plate on Sundays, cash is split evenly between the two parishes; checks can be written to either church or to the yoked parish itself. More and more, checks are just written to the yoked parish, since they share a building and all the money is going to the same place, said Buckingham.

In the past few years, the Lutheran part of the congregation seemed to grow, while the Presbyterian portion has decreased, mostly due to deaths, said Buckingham. The church lost three of its older members this past year.

The future of rural churches like the yoked parish is tied directly to the future of rural communities. And though rural churches are shrinking along with towns, both can still be viable, said Nietz, the University of Missouri sociologist. People still feel very tied to their community and their church, she said.

When a church is spiritually feeding the congregation, then it is viable, whether it is a congregation of six or 60, she said. Some pastors feel they are doing hospice care – their churches are positive and viable to the congregation, but they aren't going to last, and the pastors don't expect them to. They just want the church to have a good death, she said.

Viability in the rural church has one constant: personality. The churches most vital to their community have strong leadership, whether an ordained clergy or lay person, said Neitz.

Traditionally, many pastors just out of seminary serve rural churches. These “first call” pastors often can't earn enough money at rural churches to recover the debt accrued in seminary, so many don't stay longer than three years, said Hedegaard, the pastor from Harlem.

Hedegaard's first call was in Harlem, a three-church parish in north central Montana. He has stayed for seven years. Born in the small town of Savage just 20 miles from the North Dakota border, Hedegaard knew about rural communities and came to Harlem to stay for awhile.

He didn't go to seminary right away. He married just out of high school and worked in the Montana oil fields for 12 years. But the seed of faith planted in his younger years took root. He started seminary at Dubuque, Iowa, in 1992.

As a pastor, he hopes to provide stability. He believes he has accomplished this, in part, by staying put. He wishes denominations could require first-call pastors to stay for seven or eight years, especially in the rural part of the state. Stability from a pastor can accomplish a lot, he said.

Hedegaard's parish is known as a "three-point" parish. Every Sunday he makes the 68-mile trip from Harlem to Turner to Hogeland and back. Turner and Hogeland are 10 miles apart just south of the Canadian border. Turner's population is about 75; Hogeland's is about 12. Both towns sit on an elevated plateau call "the bench." Wheat fields bump against the football field in Turner, and there are more grain silos than houses in Hogeland.

On an average Sunday, 12 people attend church in Hogeland, said Merrillyn Billmayer, whose family farms in the area. Only a couple of those members live in town. Hedegaard still makes the trip.

His willingness to drive out every Sunday is vital to the life of the church, she said.

"I forsee a day that it won't happen, and it scares me to death," she said.

Hedegaard has put 250,000 miles on his truck since he took the job and recently had to replace the engine.

Church numbers were dwindling in Harlem and the church was struggling financially when Hedegaard first came. But things have picked up in the last few years. More people come to church now and there is more money in the offering plate. Hedegaard doesn't understand the reasons for this, but it may lend credence to his opinion that pastors who stay can usher change and vitality.

Recently the struggle for the church in Turner took a destructive turn. On Christmas Eve 2000 an electrical fire destroyed the building.

“It was a devastating thing, you know, to have it burn down on Christmas Eve,” said Max Cederberg, a farmer and rancher in the area who was a member of the church council at the time. “It kinda blew Christmas around here.”

Fortunately the church had good insurance and it was able to rebuild, a process that took nearly 16 months, he said. Hedegaard, who typically comes to Turner at least two nights a week, seemed to be there all the time, said Cederberg. He helped keep the council on course and focused on the rebuilding. He helped the council design the new church and provided important counsel that helped keep the congregation together, said Cederberg.

“For me it kinda strengthened my faith a little bit,” he said.

With agriculture not doing well and kids moving away, the church has become something people can depend on, said Cederberg.

“If the church had not gotten rebuilt it would have been another nail in the coffin,” he said.

Before Hedegaard came, the three churches had never held a joint service. Now they hold a joint service once a year. Hedegaard wants them to see how they depend on each other, even if they don’t share buildings.

This was tested after the fire in Turner. The church in Hogeland held Vacation Bible School that year and for the first time the churches’ quilting clubs met together.

Hedegaard’s work as a pastor takes him to hospital sickbeds in Billings and to basketball games, as well as church events. That’s what it means to be a pastor, he said.

“In a lot of ways, you’re the pastor of the community as well,” said Hedegaard.

High school basketball games are big events in small towns, and Hedegaard goes to as many games as he can. He sees many people who never come to church there, he said. And he visits the towns as often as possible. His pickup has essentially become his office, he said.

The view of ministering to the community as well as the church is also important to Phillips, the pastor at American Lutheran Church in Winifred. Since her arrival the church is not just surviving, but thriving.

In the past, the church has had “Sunday Pastors” who were out of the touch with the people, but Phillips has become an active part of life in Winifred, said Shirley Benes. She often travels to visit sick church members in Billings or Great Falls, and comes to as many basketball games as she can, this while being a wife and mother to three children of her own.

“She has a lot going on with her own family, but still she’ll drive all the way out just to be there,” said Diane Wickens, the piano player at Holy Family Catholic Church.

Phillips’ hard work in town and at American Lutheran has inspired church leaders. Officially she is only part-time, preaching three Sundays a month. But the church members don’t think of her as part-time.

“She gives full time, even though she gets paid part time,” said Benes.

The church can’t afford a full-time pastor, said Benes. A retired pastor from Roundup preaches on the fourth Sunday for \$100, and though Benes says she enjoys his services, there aren’t as many people in the pews the Sundays he’s there.

Phillips’ goal is to help the laity find ways to be a part of the church’s ministry and mission. Her mantra: Ministry begets ministry.

“I can’t do all things,” she said. “So the church has to build its leaders, which it is starting to do.”

Her goal is not lost on the laity.

“Just because we have a pastor, we don’t sit back and just let things happen,” said Benes.

Like Hedegaard, Phillips believes it is essential to stay committed to a congregation. She has pastored American Lutheran for six years and plans to stay. It takes time to gain the trust of the church council and the congregation, she said.

“I would say that it does take seven to 10 years for that leadership to develop enough to trust you,” she said.

Pastoral change in the rural church is difficult. A congregation may just become accustomed to a pastor and then he or she leaves; a new pastor comes in with a new way of doing things, she said.

Along with ministering at church, Phillips has also started an ecumenical youth group at the high school. The group is well attended. Everyone in the graduating class of 2003 was active, said class member Jason Wickens, Diane’s son. His family also sees Phillips as a community pastor rather than just a Lutheran pastor.

“She’s kind of our spiritual leader for Winifred,” said Diane Wickens.

Diane Wickens helps Phillips with the youth group in town, which has several activities each year including a Halloween party and weekend outings. The group is holding an Advent service this year for the first time. Many of the group members were involved this year, some of whom hadn’t ever been to church, said Wickens.

“We’re involving some kids who have never been there before and all of a sudden they have a big part in this Advent service,” she said.

Phillips welcomes all students and about 20 students regularly attend youth group meetings, said Wickens.

After the last Easter hymn was sung and the last Amen said, the men of Winifred’s American Lutheran Church quickly transformed the sanctuary into a cafeteria. They hustled out tables, chairs and place settings. It is a long-standing Easter tradition for the men to cook breakfast for the whole congregation immediately after church. They pushed the folding chairs to the side and moved in folding tables. The women chatted in the sanctuary, watching with wonder at the speed with which the men moved.

Soon the tables were set, and coffee and juice poured. Heaping plates of cinnamon rolls and steaming ham appeared, along with bowls of soft-boiled eggs. Several men scurried to refill coffee and juice cups. The women smiled, delighted to be served this morning.

People talked at length at the tables about weather, farming, and grandchildren. They caught up with friends, some of whom had traveled over 30 miles of gravel roads to get to church. They all knew each other and expected to see each other at one of the church’s biggest services of the year.

The family feeling at church is important and what makes living here special, said Karrie Sramek, 26, a beautician who works in Lewistown. She grew up south of Winifred on her family’s Black Angus ranch, and now lives in Denton, about 60 miles away. When she graduated from high school, she went to college in both Billings and Bozeman.

“I said I’d never live here again,” she said between sips of juice. “Now I never want to leave.”

She recently married a man who farms and ranches outside of Denton. She remembers how noisy it was when she was in Billings and Bozeman. Everyone was in a hurry and there never seemed to be any peace.

Now, she can open her window at night and listen to a ewe call to her lambs in the pasture near their house.

Author’s Note: The Glenmary Research Center numbers referred to in the article were compiled by the American Religion Data Archive. To understand the numbers it is important to distinguish between “members” and “adherents.” On its Web site, the American Religion Data Archive defines members as all adult members of a particular denomination. Adherents include both adults and children. For some counties in Montana, the adherent numbers were more than the actual county population. This could be because people cross county lines to attend church. There is no accurate way to depict church attendance on a statewide scale. While the Glenmary numbers give a good idea of number of churches, they fall short in predicting church attendance.

Spreading the word: One Montana preacher uses the Internet to shepherd his flock.

HARLEM – The deer were spooked when the first shot missed. Buck fever, that trembling excitement young hunters get when they get their crosshairs on a buck, is a little hard to shake. As the rifle shot echoed off the plains and into the icy blue fall sky, a three-point buck, in his youthful ignorance, stopped and looked back. The second shot was true.

Firsts are important – whether it's your first deer, or the first time you get behind the wheel of you dad's truck without him beside you, said the Rev. Scott Hedegaard, pastor of three rural Lutheran churches in north central Montana.

This has been a season of "firsts" for Hedegaard's 15-year-old son, Emory. He just got his driver's license and now his first buck.

The morning after the hunt, Hedegaard sat down at his computer and remembered his son's excitement. Then a passage from the Bible came to him: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep," (1 Corinthians 15:20.)

He wrote an e-mail about the importance of firsts and how the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the first stone in the foundation of Christian faith.

The story of his son's first deer and the joy they shared illustrates that point, he said. It is with joy that Christians remember Christ's death and resurrection, he said.

In three paragraphs, Hedegaard connected his son's deer and the Scripture, giving people something to consider for the day. He hit the send button and his message left his computer in Harlem, Mont., population 839, and traveled around the country and across the oceans.

Hedegaard sends out a similar e-mail each morning. He relates events in his life as a father, husband, and a Lutheran pastor to a piece of Scripture. He hopes the people who read his thoughts can see God's influence in their lives as well. It is another way of ministering to people scattered across north central Montana. If he can see God in the normal events of his life, then maybe other people see God in theirs as well, he said.

Three years ago he began e-mailing these daily devotions to his daughter and her friend, who had both gone to college. He remembered his years in college and how the faith he had known as a child slipped away fast. His e-mails were an effort to keep this from happening to his daughter and her friend.

But word got out and now all sorts of people get the e-mail: high school students, a Lutheran bishop and an exchange student in Germany. Kirsti Cederberg, whose family has a farm and ranch north of Harlem, frequently prints out the e-mail for people who don't have access to the Internet. The connection Hedegaard makes between daily life and faith keeps her reading, she said.

"It is almost like a calming feeling when you read it," she said.

Now his e-mail list is 71 people and he knows one woman who forwards them to 40 others.

“It worked better than I thought it would,” said Hedegaard, whose daughter is now considering going to seminary.

From pew to pulpit, laity to preacher

BIG TIMBER – The similarities between the construction business and faith aren't lost on Rich Parker.

“You can always go for a higher standard, you know, look to do better,” said Parker, 53, a lay minister who serves the Lutheran churches in Big Timber and Melville and who owns a construction business. Big Timber is a small ranching town on Interstate 90 about halfway between Bozeman and Billings. Melville is just a church, a few houses and an all-in-one store, post office, and café 25 miles north.

Parker became a Lutheran lay minister, or lay pastoral associate as the Lutheran Church calls the position, two years ago. Until a few years ago two ordained pastors served the two-point parish, but when one retired the parish couldn't afford to hire another. The churches used seminary interns to fill in for a few years, but eventually they couldn't afford the interns either, said Judy Sondeno, a third-grade teacher who has gone to the Big Timber Lutheran Church for 25 years.

Parker was a member of the church's council in the spring of 1999, when his pastor told him about the lay pastoral associate program offered by the state synod. Parker had been a member of the church for only two months and a Christian for only six months. After the meeting he told his wife, Mary, about the program and they both saw it as an opportunity to serve not only the church they attended, but also other churches in need.

“What a wonderful way to meet other people and not just-hopefully-bless them, but to be blessed,” he said.

A contractor by trade, Parker moved to Big Timber from Nebraska in 1981. His business, R. Parker Construction, keeps him busy sometimes six days a week, and he preaches two sermons a month – one at Big Timber and one at Melville.

“It's certainly a challenge at times,” he said. “You wonder how you're going to get it all together and make it work.”

The Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America refers to him as a lay pastoral associate, or LPA. People in church call him Pastor Rich.

The congregation looks at him differently than it would an ordained pastor, said Sondeno. He is one of them, she said. He works at remodeling homes during the week, but still finds time for his family and church.

“He's been in our shoes,” she said. “He's walked where we have.”

He understands the congregations and his sermons cover things they can relate to, she said. She feels fortunate Parker decided to help them out.

“When he decided to do this lay ministry thing, we were overjoyed,” she said.

The problem of filling empty pulpits in Montana isn't unique to the Lutheran Church. Many rural churches can expect an ordained pastor only one Sunday a month. The circuit-riding pastors, common in the homesteading days when churches and people were far flung, are in vogue again. Church leaders recognize that the days of one ordained pastor for each church are over. Some rural pastors now serve five churches.

So churches have turned to the laity for help. From Methodists to Catholics, men and women who have never been to seminary and many who never before considered being involved in ministry are stepping forward.

The movement, though difficult at times, is bringing the church back to its beginning, said the Rev. Jessica Crist, an associate to the bishop of the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

"The church was started with lay people," said Crist. "Jesus was a lay person."

But for the laity, this commitment can be demanding.

When Parker has a sermon to give on Sunday, his preparations begin on Monday. He first reads the Scripture assigned for the service by the Lutheran liturgical calendar: one each from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament and Gospel.

He uses the Internet to research interpretations and commentary. Sometimes his sermons discuss a common theme through all the readings, but mostly he speaks on the verses from the New Testament and Gospels.

There are nights when he is so exhausted it is hard to concentrate.

"But I will stop and pray and ask for his word and his leading," he said.

With population declining in rural communities and churches, having a lay pastor, like Parker, could determine whether small churches stay open, said the Rev. Tom Lee, also an associate to the Montana bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

But the training must be sufficient for laity if they are going to help lead a church, said Bishop Richard Omland, who presides over the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

“We do the best we can to guarantee that the people we place in the public office will be faithful to the church,” he said.

The Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and United Methodists are the three largest denominations in the state, according to Glenmary Research Center, a Catholic research center that compiles nationwide statistics on religion. All three have programs to train laity because many of their rural churches cannot afford to hire full-time ordained clergy due to dwindling membership and the lack of available clergy.

The Lutheran church created the lay pastoral associate training program in 1997. It generally takes two years to complete and students who live near each other gather in small groups to go over video lectures and textbook discussion.

The curriculum is split into four sections: Old Testament, New Testament, History of Christian Thought, and Lutheran Theology. Four short courses accompany this foundation work and are taken at weekend retreats, which are held once a year and include all students in the state. The short courses cover a variety of topics from developing a deeper faith to congregational life and the art of preaching. Along with the

coursework, each student must meet regularly with an ordained pastor who serves as a mentor.

The United Methodist Church has two types of official lay pastors: “local church lay speaker” and “certified lay speaker.” To become a local church lay speaker, students take a 10-hour weekend course. Certified lay speakers must take an additional course, sometimes offered during the weekend training, and must re-certify every three years. Between 500 and 600 people have taken the 10-hour course in the Yellowstone Conference, said Maggie Newman, director of Lay Speaking Ministries for the Yellowstone Conference, which includes all of Montana and northern Wyoming.

However, these classes are only suggested for lay ministers; they aren’t required to preside over a service, or give a sermon, said Newman.

“They give you some tools to figure out what your calling is,” she said.

A “calling” is God’s prompting someone into some sort of ministry, she said. Everyone in the church has gifts of ministry, and God calls them to do things with those gifts, she said.

Certified lay speakers may be called on to preach at a church other than their own when the need arises, said Newman. Local church lay speakers generally serve with their home church. Methodist lay speakers do a variety of things: teach Sunday School, visit the shut-ins and sick, or substitute in the pulpit, she said. The lay training helps people better understand their faith and ministry.

However, lay speakers cannot administer the sacraments, which for the Methodist Church are baptism and communion. A lay speaker may serve communion only if an ordained clergy first blesses the bread and wine.

The Catholic Church has a similar lay ministry model.

Catholics may perform any task in the service not designated for an ordained priest, said Jim Tucker, Christian formation director for the Helena Diocese, which oversees Catholic churches in the western half of Montana. Lay ministers may perform administrative tasks, serve communion and visit the sick and shut-ins. They cannot give the homily – the Catholic term for sermon – which is a duty reserved for ordained clergy. However, a lay person may read a homily written by an ordained priest. Laity can serve communion only if a priest first blesses the bread and wine.

Lay ministry is the way baptized members contribute to the church's ministry, said Tucker. Even though people need no formal training for these tasks, the Catholic Church recommends they go through the lay training classes.

The lay training program in the Helena Diocese meets one weekend a month, September through April, for two years. This training is focused on giving students a good foundation of the faith and doesn't deal with skills like assisting at mass or serving communion, said Tucker.

This fall, the diocese will likely add a third year to the program, which will deal specifically with certain ministry skills, said Tucker.

Just as you don't need to go through the courses to be a lay minister in the Catholic Church, going through the courses doesn't automatically mean you are a lay minister, said Tucker. Some people take the courses just to deepen their faith. Since 1982, when the courses first began, nearly 400 people in the Helena Diocese have completed the program, according to Tucker's estimation.

But more change is coming. The denominations in the Montana Association of Churches have decided to join forces and form an ecumenical lay ministry training program.

The Montana Association of Churches, or MAC, consists of eight denominations: American Baptist, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Roman Catholic Church, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church. They are combining resources and expertise to give lay ministry candidates in the state the basics skills and knowledge of the trade, said Jessica Crist, who, as assistant to the bishop, is the Lutheran representative to the MAC committee working on the program.

The denominations can have a better program for their lay ministry candidates if they work together, she said. The focus is on high-quality, relevant instruction that gives students a good foundation in Scripture, theology and pastoral services.

The program will consist of 12 units. The classes will be held one weekend every other month for two years. Each weekend class will cover one unit, said Sister Eileen Hurley, director of lay ministry for the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, and a Catholic representative to the MAC committee.

The program is not officially sanctioned yet by all the denominations, but she hopes MAC church leaders will approve it and classes will start in fall 2004, she said.

The classes will cover basics like the Old and New Testaments, educational ministry, and conflict resolution. Things specific to each denomination, like order of services and church polity, will be left to each denomination, said Sister Hurley.

Each class will be held in three different locations, she said – one each in the western, central and eastern parts of the state – making them more accessible for students.

Not all students will take the entire series of courses, she said. Some who are already in lay ministry programs will be able to take the units they need to complete their education.

Each weekend will cost \$100 per student to cover room and board, class materials and an honorarium for the instructors, said Sister Hurley.

The idea of an ecumenical program first surfaced about 10 years ago, but there wasn't support for it from the heads of the different denominations. Now a lot of energy is behind the effort, said Crist, even though it means sacrificing a little ownership and control.

“We are taking a little risk in stepping out together and saying you can do this,” she said.

Sister Hurley agrees – there is risk in bringing together different theologies and different ideas of ministry. But in the end the risk is worth the opportunity to learn about each other.

“We are going to focus where our likenesses are, not our differences,” she said.

Rural parishes will benefit from this program, said Sister Hurley. The MAC wants to provide their laity a sound education.

This project is monumental because it signifies the coming together of eight denominations to encourage, educate and prepare each other for ministry, she said.

“How we can work together as a church, that is the whole concept of what ecumenism is about,” said Sister Hurley. “To have eight denominations working together is marvelous. We’re breaking new ground.”

While pounding nails, measuring a two-by-four or pulling apart concrete forms, Rich Parker finds himself mulling over the Scripture and his upcoming sermon.

Parker struggles to answer the question of whether he wants to be known as a pastor or a builder.

“I honestly would like to look at myself as a pastor,” he said. “I don’t know if God has me there yet.”

His faith has permeated all parts of his life now, he said. It wasn’t always this way. He wasn’t raised in church and though he was confirmed as an adult after he got married he went to church only on Christmas and Easter. But his faith has changed him, he said. It shows in the gentle way he reflects on the last few years and how he is careful to give credit to God for changes in his life.

“I believe I’m a good leader,” he said. “It’s not of my own doing. It’s God’s power moving through me.”

People look at him differently now. He remembers a time just after he began his lay ministry courses when he was doing some work on the church and a friend walked by.

“That’s probably as close as you’ll get to a church,” the friend said.

Parker just laughs. The same friend was astonished when he came to a wedding Parker officiated last year.

But Parker understands. He still feels amazed at the direction his life has gone.

Last month, Mary asked him a question as they drove home from Harlowtown, 45 miles north of Big Timber, where he was filling in four Sundays at a church that had lost its pastor.

“If I’d’ve said to you five years ago you’d be doing this, what would you have said?” she asked.

Parker laughed. The answer was obvious.

“I’d’ve said you’re crazy, of course.”

A Web site helps a declining church

RUDYARD – If you can't find a pastor to lead your church, maybe you should look to the Internet.

The Calvary Evangelical Church in Rudyard did, and within an hour of posting the advertisement on Dec. 2, 2003 the church received 12 applications, said Joe Lincoln, president of the church council. The position has been empty for nearly 18 months, and people in the church had begun to wonder if they would ever have another pastor.

“One of the hard things now is making the decision of whom we'll choose,” said Lincoln.

Like many rural churches, Calvary Evangelical is in a state of decline. Young people have moved away and Sunday attendance has dropped, said Lincoln. Twenty years ago, 80 people were attending church. Now the congregation is down to about 15. A lot of people don't come to church unless there is a pastor, said Lincoln. And though they have held at 15 for awhile, he knows the church is going to need a pastor to survive.

Lincoln's great-grandfather started the church 20 miles north of Rudyard in 1911, when his sons homesteaded in the area. The church moved to town in 1938. It is a

member of the Western Conference of the Evangelical Church, which includes all of Montana and North Dakota.

The previous pastor left abruptly in the spring of 2002 to join the Catholic Church in Conrad. In the absence of its own pastor, the church has paid pastors from as far away as Great Falls, about 125 miles south, to preside some Sundays. The church pays \$50 for preaching and a little for mileage. Other Sundays, a woman from the congregation preaches, he said. But other needs, like funerals, weddings and counseling, have been more difficult to meet, said Lincoln.

“That is the point where laymen need to step forward,” he said. “If you don’t step up and fill that gap, your church is going to go.”

One couple in church has had marital problems and instead of seeing a pastor, they have sought guidance from a church elder. The church asked the former pastor to come back to do a funeral service and when a couple from the church got married, they asked another pastor in town to perform the service.

Sunday school and a mid-week prayer service have both become things of the past, said Lincoln. There isn’t much interest anymore in the prayer service, though Lincoln would like to see it come back, and there aren’t any children to go to Sunday school, he said.

That is why the church would like to hire a younger pastor with a family, said Lincoln. He hopes a young family could attract youthful churchgoers.

“If we don’t get a pastor who can appeal to the young people, then we’ll be done for,” he said. “It would be nice if we could find somebody who is in their 30s.”

Before the church advertised on the Internet, it had interviewed four applicants sent by the conference. But the church didn't feel it was getting the attention it needed, said Lincoln.

"There comes a time of desperation when you have to try something new," he said.

A member of the church council stumbled onto churchstaffing.com, a Web site focused on helping churches find pastors. Here churches advertise their vacancies and prospective pastors post their resumés. The Web site also sends out regular e-mails announcing new openings. The church received more than 40 applications in 10 days, said Lincoln. They had received only four applications in the previous 18 months.

There is a risk of receiving applications from people who are either unqualified or have criminal backgrounds, said Lincoln. But the Web site performs background checks on request and for a fee. Currently the church is taking advantage of the free service offered by the site, which is simply the job listing. But it is considering buying the fee service, which provides a database for resumés. The prices range from \$70 for one month to \$250 for a year.

It is similar to an online dating service, he said. The church is seeking a suitable pastor who is seeking work.

Lincoln knows that making a living in Rudyard can be hard. He is a semi-retired rancher and school bus driver. He sold most of his ranch this year. The church is prepared to offer a new pastor a salary of about \$30,000, but the person it hires will likely need to have a job on the side, he said.

Some of the applications are from bi-vocational pastors. One applicant from Michigan stated he wouldn't accept a salary. He is an electrical engineer and does a lot of computer work, said Lincoln. A doctor, mortician and substitute teacher have also applied.

Some seem to be attracted to the Montana setting. In its Web advertisement, the church says it is a "small, rural church on the plains of northcentral Montana ... The church is located in a small farming community of 300."

One applicant lives in California and wants to get away from the West Coast. Another is an outdoorsman who said in his application he would like nothing better than to drive his all-terrain vehicle around on the open plains. Another is an avid fly-fisherman, though the blue-ribbon trout streams are miles away, joked Lincoln.

It could be the parsonage, a nice four-bedroom home with hardwood floors, that attracts them, said Lincoln. Whatever the reason for all the applications, the church council is excited.

"We're more encouraged than we have been in a while," he said.

The church council has looked through the applications and rejected more than half of them, he said. They are going to seek more information from the other half, but they aren't in a hurry.

"If it doesn't happen until spring, we'll be all right," Lincoln said.

** The Web site referred to in this article is: <http://www.churchstaffing.com>.*

Last stand at Deer Creek

LINDSAY – Deer Creek Lutheran Church and its outbuildings shone white in the early summer sun, front doors open wide and people showing up in farm trucks dressed in their Sunday best. They walked across the fresh cut grass carrying casseroles, salads and pies. It could be a Sunday morning at the church 60 years earlier, but it is June 22, 2003. This is the only service Deer Creek will have this year.

The annual service started three years ago after the church had already given up meeting during the school year because of a decline in membership. Even then the congregation was only seven or eight people. In February of 2000 they decided to cut back to one service a year, effectively shutting down the church.

“There’s nobody left,” said John McCormick, a local farmer and rancher who is head of the church’s council.

Today the church looks much like it did when it was built in 1917. The steeple and the small entryway on the white plank-board building were remodeled several years ago, but there still is no plumbing, and the original outhouses stand next to the graveyard.

Deer Creek Lutheran Church is near the town of Lindsay, 27 miles northwest of Glendive in the rolling hills of the divide between the Missouri and the Yellowstone rivers. Like many churches in rural eastern Montana, its membership has fallen. Deer Creek was never large— during the 1950s and '60s there were 20 to 30 people at services, which were held two Sundays a month. It had Sunday school each service and Vacation Bible School for children in the summer. But its numbers dwindled, mirroring the population of the surrounding area and the town. In 1994 when attendance had fallen to about 10, members decided to suspend services, except during the summer. In 2000 the eight members decided to hold one service a year.

On this Sunday morning McCormick stands at the door of the church welcoming people and handing out programs. He is tall with thinning reddish hair and a warm welcoming face, tan below a line just above his glasses. For many of the men in church, who take their hats off at the door, the tan line reveals time spent working the land, as their families have done for generations.

McCormick's mother, Marie, is busy in the basement kitchen, orchestrating preparations for the potluck. There are about 30 people to feed today and she is busy. She turns on the stove and refrigerator to keep casseroles warm and desserts cool; McCormick's son, Trevor, talks with other farmers in the sanctuary waiting for the service to start – three generations coming together for the annual service at the church, which has figured in their family since John's grandparents moved here from Wisconsin in 1930.

McCormick is also on the church council at Zion Lutheran Church in Glendive. His family started going to Zion about 15 years ago when his daughter, Ria, was in

confirmation classes. Services at Deer Creek were sporadic at the time. The congregation tried to meet every other Sunday, so the McCormicks went to Glendive on alternate weeks.

Like the McCormicks, other families who wanted to go to church every Sunday turned to Glendive or Circle, about 25 miles to the northwest where some of the ranch kids go to high school now. It wasn't a difficult decision; it was just the way things were, said McCormick.

Forty years ago, when he went to Sunday school and Vacation Bible School, there were annual dinners, church socials and a Ladies Aid. He still feels a duty to the church at Deer Creek and a responsibility to take care of it.

Many in Lindsay are descendents of Scandinavian homesteaders who settled the area in the early 1900s. They brought with them determination to survive, hope in next year's crop, and faith that God would provide for them: three intangibles still surviving in the Lindsay area, said the Rev. Avis Anderson, who presided at this year's service.

The equipment has changed and technology has evolved but the purpose is unwavering for these descendants still wrestling crops out of the same rolling, rugged, dry land their families first set horse-drawn plows to nearly 100 years ago.

In a thesis written for her master's degree in history from Utah State University in 1974, Anderson examines the immigration of Scandinavians to Dawson County, which includes Lindsay. When she wrote the paper, some of the original homesteaders were still there.

Clarence Peterson came to the Lindsay area with his family in 1909 when he was only 10. When Anderson interviewed him, Peterson described the area as “a lonely plateau of prairie table land – treeless, seemingly waterless, and endless.”

Peterson and many of the homesteaders hailed from Black River, Wisc., and decided to come to eastern Montana, persuaded by flyers and representatives of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which touted Montana as the Promised Land.

With the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, the initial allotment of land under the Homestead Act of 1868 went from 160 acres to 320. This change further enticed farmers to take the chance and come West. In Wisconsin 320 acres was a big spread, but in eastern Montana it turned out to be just enough to starve on, said McCormick.

Due to the land rush, the population of Dawson County went from just over 2,400 in 1900 to nearly 12,800 in 1910. The county would never see the population that high again.

Even older farmers who were well established in Wisconsin took the gamble and came West only to end up trying to scrape a living out of the dry land, wrote Anderson. In 1910, from seed to harvest no rain fell and homesteaders had to dig 15-to 20-foot wells just for something to drink, according to Anderson’s thesis.

After the majority of the new homesteaders left in the 1920s, the Great Depression set in. Some families came in then and bought homesteads that were for sale. That is how John McCormick’s family started. His grandfather, Fred McCormick, bought an old homestead in 1930. The settlers who lasted, like Fred McCormick, enjoyed the rain and good market prices in the ‘40s, but many of the original homesteaders were gone.

Until the '70s, when it became easier to drive to town, people around Lindsay had to provide for themselves much of what they needed to survive, said Ralph Miller, who lives in a retirement home near Zion Lutheran Church in Glendive. It is a short walk for him to get to church. Miller, now 81, was born on a farm in Savage, Mont., a short distance east of Lindsay. He moved there after serving in World War II, marrying Lorvetta Harvey and farming her family farm until he retired.

“Kinda lived off the land is what we did,” he said.

Electricity didn't come to the area until the early '50s, said Miller. Some farmers used small 32-volt generators for lights, but there were no other electrical appliances. Stoves operated on propane or butane and most people had iceboxes, which held a block of ice in the top compartment to keep perishable food items cool. Some enjoyed the luxury of owning butane-operated refrigerators, he said. The first phone lines were 10-party lines and didn't come to the area until 1952. With the multiple party lines, many people could listen in on one phone conversation.

“You didn't dare talk about your neighbors or anybody,” said Miller.

Miller travels to Lindsay as much as he can, he said. He enjoys meeting with friends and reminiscing. It was an important part of church for him when he lived out on the farm and it's a big reason he still comes to the annual service. And even though people live far apart and there aren't as many now, a strong sense of community remains, said Miller.

“It means a lot to me to get together with people you don't see maybe once a year,” he said.

Miller remembers the sense of community at Deer Creek. When you needed anything all you had to do was get the word out and people came to help, whether it was to butcher beef, build a house or take care of sick family, he said.

“We didn’t always agree on everything, but you could call on neighbors whenever you needed help,” he said.

The first settlers formed two churches: East Deer Creek and West Deer Creek Lutheran Churches. West Deer Creek’s first service was held in the home of Hans Thompson on May 29, 1910. East Deer Creek held its first service in the home of Harold Knapp, Sept. 29, 1911. The two churches were only a few miles apart and in sight of each other, but stood further apart on the theological issue of predestination and also whether the services should be in Norwegian or English. The members of West Deer Creek also felt that the younger congregation at East Deer Creek was more concerned with socializing than actual church. The churches tried combining in 1926, but the old differences weren’t settled and they split again in 1934. But the split couldn’t last. By 1944, East Deer Creek struggled with a membership of only three families. They couldn’t remain separate from West Deer Creek any longer, and the churches united for good in 1944. West Deer Creek Lutheran Church dropped the “West” from its name and the East Deer Creek Church building was sold and moved near Vida, Mont., to a congregation that didn’t have a church.

Church was a central part of the settlers’ lives when they came to Dawson County, said Anderson. The settlements in Wisconsin, where they came from, were built with the town as the center and farms fanning out in the nearby countryside. But the rugged land around Lindsay didn’t allow such settlements, said Anderson. People settled

on their homesteads with much more distance between homes. Church became the one of the few times families could get together and as a result became more valuable.

“People needed church back in the old days,” said Bob Peterson, Clarence Peterson’s son, who still farms and ranches in the area. Church and their faith in God kept them going, he said.

The women of West Deer Creek formed the Ladies Aid on August 2, 1914. The group provided events to bring people together, such as ice cream socials, fall bazaars, and basket socials. They took collections at each meeting and bought many things the church needed – a furnace, organ and refrigerator, said Barbara Peterson, Bob’s wife.

The Ladies Aid provided a social outlet for the women, said Peterson. Their gatherings often included a Bible study, sewing and baking, and prayer. At their first meeting they elected Alma Jacobson as president and collected \$2.57. Over the years they kept careful records on social events. The church history, written in 2000 for the church’s 90th anniversary, contains many of the details of food served, money raised and items purchased.

“August 20, 1920, our first Thanksgiving Supper and Apron Sale was held,” reads the church history. “We served scalloped potatoes, baked beans, meat sandwiches, coffeecake and donuts. Price per plate was 25 cents. Each (Ladies Aid) member was to donate an apron for the sale.”

The proceeds from this supper and sale were \$24.95.

The Thanksgiving Supper became the group’s signature event and drew about 200 people. People would buy a dinner ticket at the door, get an auction number and then sit in the sanctuary and wait for a table. The dinner was held on a Saturday in October and

would begin with turkey at five and the auction at eight, she said. The items auctioned were made by the Ladies Aid over the previous year: rugs, a quilt, candy, jams and garden produce. The auction would often get creative.

“Once they auctioned off a neighbor’s kitten who had wandered into the auction,” said Barbara Peterson.

Faced with dwindling membership, the Ladies Aid folded in 1991, she said. That was also the last Thanksgiving Supper.

When Peterson was younger it seemed as if faith and the importance of church were passed down in the family, she said. Grandparents passed their devotion on to their children and grandchildren. But as people began to own more vehicles and travel more, they got more involved with sports and other social organizations, she said.

With the advancement of technology in farming, farmers became more independent as well, she said. Much of the work they had once completed together, farmers began to do on their own.

It also became more difficult to make a living as a farmer and rancher, she said. As farmers move away or die, often the land is bought by neighboring farms rather than going to their children.

“We’re so few and far between anymore,” she said.

Bob Petersen remembers a time when there was a homestead on nearly every quarter section. Everywhere roads intersect there was a house and a family. Only a third of the farms are left from the ’50s, he estimates.

The farm crisis in the 1980s overwhelmed many farmers still in the area. It was a time when farmers carried a lot of debt, and when interest rates spiked many couldn’t

make their payments. This, coupled with the beginning of several years of drought, forced many farms to shut down. People moved into cities – Billings, Bozeman, and Great Falls – to find work, a trend that continues today.

Farmers now have to plow more land to maintain their standard of living, said McCormick. That means farmers who can't continue to buy more land, sell out. It also means that when children want to work the farm and carry on the family tradition, they generally can't because the farm doesn't earn enough income to support two families anymore.

On this first day of summer, the church is filled mostly with people who have stayed. The church has stood at the junction of these two dirt roads for as long as anyone here can remember. A fixture of the landscape and community, like their farms – like each other.

“Part of it is getting together with neighbors again,” said Barbara Peterson. “We don't do that as often as we used to.”

The church history book shows an undated picture from East Deer Creek church with more than a hundred people posed in front of the simple white, plank-board building, with no steeple or cross, just arched windows to reveal its purpose. Eight pictures of the members of West Deer Creek church are dated from 1971 through 1994. Though the number of people in the pictures range from 12 to 36, if you look closely, you can see some people present at this year's service: John and Marla McCormick, Bob and Barbara Peterson, Kenny Lars Slagsvold and Ralph Miller. The McCormick children, Ria and Trevor, appear in the 1979 picture and are in every picture thereafter.

This year five small children attended with their parents. Everyone at the service stayed for the potluck afterward.

Church here is different than church services in the city, where people often come and go unnoticed. Here your absence or presence is noticed. People here know each other – know about each other. They've known each other for years. They remember that John McCormick was going to school in Bozeman when his father, Gilman, passed away.

They know that McCormick's son Trevor has graduated from school in North Dakota and isn't coming back to the farm. Bob Peterson knows how many acres McCormick started with and McCormick knows about what Peterson got for his heifers last year. People here know each other's lives. They remember first loves, first cars and first wives. The anonymity is gone. The pretense of secrecy isn't there. You are known in a church community like this and being at church is like being with family.

Anderson's sermon reflects on the readings prescribed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church calendar: the book of Job, 2 Corinthians, the Gospel of Mark and the book of Psalms. Liturgical churches like order, and unless it is an anniversary, like the service in 2000 marking the church's 90th year, the sermon is a reflection on readings, not on the annual event, said Anderson.

"The people out there need to hear the word of God," she said.

The service is scheduled to start at 11 a.m. though most people arrive about 15 minutes early. They stand together chatting in the entryway with McCormick or in the basement setting out homemade rolls and pies. People take their time finding seats in the old wooden pews. There is no rush and the service is delayed a little. McCormick is still visiting with people when the organ starts to play. Everyone stands and sings.

They pass the offering plate. Anderson preaches. People take communion.

Anderson announces Bible studies and potlucks for the church in Glendive, which has overseen the church in Deer Creek off and on since it began. Marla McCormick, John's wife, makes an announcement about a plot map made of the graveyard behind the church. She brought the map to church so people could check for mistakes.

Later, McCormick explained that in the old days, people who weren't Lutheran could be buried in the graveyard, but separate from the Lutheran graves. They buried the non-Lutherans next to the fence, and after all these years the majority of graves rest there.

After the final hymn people linger for a time talking in the sanctuary, as if they don't want this part to end, not just yet. The planning and anticipation has come and gone and the service they looked forward to is over. But the smells of casseroles drifting up from downstairs speak convincingly to everyone's stomach and a small line forms in front of the counter in the back of the small one-room concrete basement. Though the church wasn't able to keep attendance up when it held regular services, the church is always full for the annual service.

The men talk about rain and crops, the women about church and children. The few children go to play in the fresh-cut grass; chasing grasshoppers around the outhouses and between the headstones in the cemetery that overlooks Deer Creek.

Outside the day turns into an eastern Montana marvel. The sky is clear blue and a moderate 70 degrees replaces the near 100-degree heat from the previous few days. A cool early-summer breeze blows out of the north. If you look southeast toward the Yellowstone River, and you know just what spot of grass to focus on, you can see where

the old East Deer Creek church stood. Everywhere is green and every field is waving in the wind.

The members keep Deer Creek open more because the past than to fulfill the weekly desire to get together and worship the Lord, said McCormick. When kids today drive past the church, they don't feel any connection, he said.

"It's where their folks used to go to church," he said.

But McCormick remembers riding to Vacation Bible School with his brother and a wild-driving priest from Circle, who enjoyed racing along the country dirt roads between the McCormicks' farm and the church. And the time his father got their Dodge stuck in a snow drift while taking a shortcut across a field on the way to church. But memories won't sustain the church, and his generation is the last with those ties. If people meet their spiritual needs elsewhere, it's not important to keep the church going, he said.

Besides, church just isn't a building; it is community – it is people, said Anderson.

"Church is wherever God's people are," she said.

Members will decide at their annual February meeting whether to have a service the following June. As long as they decide to keep going, the church in Glendive will support them.

"I think everybody had the faith and worshipped God at Deer Creek with the same passion and commitment that they do in Glendive right now," said McCormick.

Deer Creek Lutheran Church was necessary when more people lived in the area, as it was necessary to have a grocery store, a bakery, and a lumberyard. But those things closed and someday so will the church, he said.

A white glass cross sits atop the church. The Sunday school purchased the 6-foot cross in 1961, shortly after electricity came to the area. Like a city streetlight, the cross lights up at night. The old church shimmers under its glow. Now the cross is difficult to pick out from a distance. Security lights, which also come on at night, have become commonplace in farmyards and look like stars on the nighttime landscape. But when they first lit the cross, it was the only light around and gave travelers a bearing to guide them home, especially in bad weather. The cross is still important to people and when it goes out, they quickly call McCormick about getting it fixed. In some ways the electric cross makes the church a local landmark and provides a reason for it to be there, he said.

The Rev. A.J. Gravdal, who led the church when it was built in 1917, is quoted in the church history with words that echo still:

“Place a cross at the peak of the steeple so that the world will know where we stand.”

Conclusion

Since I moved to Missoula five years ago, I have heard stories about little country churches – churches built during homesteading days at the junction of two dirt roads. As stories would trickle into the newspapers about the financial struggle in Montana’s rural areas, I wondered how these churches would survive.

As I started investigating, I found information leading me to believe that some were surviving, even growing. I based my beliefs on the Glenmary Research Center numbers of congregations and adherents. With these numbers in hand I began talking to people.

The Glenmary numbers gave me a place to start, but didn’t begin to describe the whole story. Each church I found presented a unique story. Some were positive stories of survival and change; others were of sadness and the decline to eventual closure.

In encountering these churches and their stories, I began to bump into my own faith. Over the past five years my belief in God has grown and certainly influenced my interest in rural churches. I had to figure out how to set my personal beliefs about church and the role of a faith community aside when reporting for these articles. Sometimes this was simple. General interviews looking for statistical information and an opinion on rural faith didn’t involve much relational interaction between me and the person I was talking to. The challenge came when people let me into their church and homes to see what their lives were like.

Talking about my own faith is personal. It involves vulnerability. As I asked other people about their faith I tried to be sensitive to this, while still asking direct questions. Sometimes I found myself looking for “right” answers. I wanted good nuggets on how

faith in God kept them invested in their church and people's lives, or maybe how their faith carried them through the struggles of being a farmer and rancher. But this was rarely what I got. In many cases faith for the people I interviewed was as much a part of life as drought, wind and soil. When I asked about the role of faith in their life, they would say something like, "We have faith that God will take care of us," or, "We are stewards of the land and we have to have faith that God will provide."

Obviously answers like these were right. They told the story of a farmer's faith. They weren't the answers I expected or hoped for, but these stories aren't about my expectations. I learned to set my own notions of faith aside and enjoy the surprises found in the truthful answers to my questions.

Sometimes I asked questions as a person of faith. I used language that was understood in church and Bible studies, but I didn't do this to deceive. I did this because the interview had turned to a conversation about church or faith. I didn't try to camouflage my identity as a reporter. But it was often easier to ask the questions I needed to ask when they were comfortable with me as a person. If it hadn't been for these types of conversations, I may not have known the questions to ask.

Journalism is about people. As a reporter I could no more put aside my faith as I could cut off my arm, but that didn't mean I had to press my beliefs or biases on the people I interviewed. As a journalist who believes in God, part of my faith becomes a faith in the truth – faith that if I can tell the truth, I have told the story.

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