

## Rural Small Churches Continue To Serve Members

**By: Karen Carpenter**

The landscape in the surrounding area is dotted with small churches. However, it isn't always easy to keep the doors open in a rural church.

Members age, move or pass away, leaving few to do the work or fill the collection plate. Buildings still need repair and salaries need to be paid even with fewer members.

While there certainly are struggles of keeping a small congregation vibrant, there are also joys. Small congregations band together and the bonds become those of a family. Parishioners know they can count on each other no matter the situation.

Baker Downer Westminster Presbyterian Church in Baker is one such congregation.

They have a membership of 70. At one time there were two Presbyterian congregations, one at Baker and one in Downer. They were served by one pastor. In 1986 First Presbyterian Church of Downer closed its doors. The congregation joined with Baker to become Baker-Downer Westminster Presbyterian Church.

The church has been led, on a part-time basis, for the last 12 years by Pastor Lorelee Benz. "Pastor Lorelee is such a gift to us, we are so blessed to have her" commented long-time member Margaret Ann Thompson.

Pastor Benz works for Bell Bank in Fargo during the week-days.

"One of the challenges of a small rural church is that we are limited in the number of programs and activities we can offer due to smaller budgets and a smaller pool of volunteers.

"On the positive side, that means we have an opportunity to create a strong sense of community because everyone knows everyone else. We can't remain anonymous or hide our flaws, so we learn to accept and love each other.

"In a culture that is increasingly disconnected, where people are hungering for genuine community, that can be something special.

"My goal as a leader is to focus on spiritual formation. I believe the desire to grow in numbers should always be secondary to a commitment to help people grow in the knowledge of God and Christ-like character," Pastor Benz continued.

"The congregation has a deep and long-standing commitment to mission, and so looking for fresh and creative ways to carry out that mandate is important.

"I think Baker-Downer Church is unique for its caring and hospitality. The Annual Fish Dinner in October, which originated with the Downer congregation over 25 years ago and is still going strong, is one of our unique traditions.

"There is a deep devotion to mission, loving our neighbors and

taking care of one another. I am continually amazed at how generous our members are with all of their resources.

"They have a strong sense of pride in their faith heritage and feel a responsibility to carry that on for future generations," concluded Pastor Benz.

Grong Free Lutheran Church located in the Rollag Hills is another small congregation.

The church was organized in 1872 primarily by people of Norwegian decent in the area.

Now the congregation on Sunday mornings averages about 20 attendees. Most of them are sporting gray hair now.

There is a lot of loyalty among the membership. Most of the families have been members for generations. They are determined to keep the church building in repair and the doors open.

Pastor Gary Simons has been the spiritual leader of the congregation for 20 years. Simons lives in Fargo. His location makes it convenient for him to visit the members who reside in nursing homes in the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area.

"I don't know what we would do if it weren't for Pastor Simons," said Darrel Knutson, congregation president. "He has been so loyal to the church and congregation. We are fortunate to have him."

West of Barnesville are the small communities of Comstock and Hoff. They each have a Lutheran church.

Comstock Lutheran and Hoff Lutheran each have approximately 200 members.

The original Norwegian Lutheran church in Comstock was formed in 1895 and the building built in 1901.

The Clara congregation was formed and built in 1897. The two joined together in 1960 and the present day Comstock church was built in 1963.

Hoff Lutheran was formed and built in 1901.

"When one is part of a smaller church there are fewer people to call upon to help in all areas of ministry," said Pastor Jill Steichen who serves Comstock and Hoff.

"As in any church, large or small, a small group of people do the majority of the work. Smaller churches generally have fewer people to help with music so having a choir, or contemporary service is difficult.

"It is difficult to keep full time pastors with the decreasing number



Little Bethany Lutheran Church in rural Barnesville is one of the small area churches that finds ways to stay vital. They share a minister with New Life Lutheran in Rothsay. The congregation is a strong and faithful community of believers.

of active church members and decreased financial support.

The parish has been successful in keeping vibrant by sharing a pastor. They also worship together with one service each Sunday. They switch off holding worship in the two buildings.

The two congregations share Sunday school, confirmation, LYO, worship committee, education committee and boards.

"People have been very faithful about coming to each others congregations so we have good attendance, a great youth program and stable finances," said Pastor Steichen. "Sunday worship is held at Comstock on even dates of the month and at Hoff odd dates.

"What makes our parish unique is that many people are related between the churches so it feels natural to participate in each others churches.

"We worship together year round. We are gaining new members and they generally feel that they are joining the parish not necessarily being only tied to one of the two congregations," concluded Pastor Steichen.

North Immanuel Lutheran Church located between Barnesville and Pelican Rapids is another smaller, rural church.

The church was formed in 1871. North Immanuel has 250 members and about 30 attend on an average Sunday.

"Sometimes, our strengths are also our weaknesses," commented Pastor Ethan Fearing. He has been full time pastor for the past three years.

"It has been a trend across the nation over the last decade for 20-40 year-olds to walk away from organized religion. As a historically family congregation, this trend is especially detrimental to us when one generation is suddenly and seemingly missing.

"Our situation of being ten miles from a town also makes it difficult to draw new people to attend worship," continued Pastor Fearing.

North Immanuel has a strong tradition of hospitality through meals.

"Our meatball supper, barbecues during outdoor worship, Easter Breakfast, and Passover Seder meal are just a few examples," said Pastor Fearing.

"We are also always looking to use the God-given gifts of the people in new and exciting ways."

As with any congregation, it is the collection of unique people who gather to worship that makes a church special.

"This is God's family, and we are blessed to know and have communion with each other, while

also finding ways to share God's love with others and our communities," concluded Pastor Fearing.

In the Rollag Hills is a three-point parish, Gran-Park-Rollag Lutheran Church.

All three churches were separately started pre-1900. "Not sure when. They're old!" stated Pastor James Greene who leads the three-point parish.

Banning together and hiring one minister to care for the three congregations was a good option for the three congregations.

Gran has 67 active baptized members, Park has 59 active baptized members and Rollag has 481 active baptized members.

"One of the biggest challenges of an older rural congregation is when we get stuck thinking we can do things the way we did 40 or 50 years ago when "we" were raising our kids," commented Pastor Greene.

"While there still is a lot of family ties, we also have a lot of people who have no ties to this community except they live out here and want to stay living out here.

"We're in a unique situation in that we're growing, not leaps and

bounds, but for a congregation situated where we are we should be dying.

"At times it's hard for people to grasp we need to think of how can we best thrive with who we are and what we've got!" finished Pastor Greene.

Little Bethany sits just a few miles southeast of Barnesville. They have joined with New Life Lutheran Church in Rothsay to share a minister. That is one way that they are able to continue as a congregation. The Sunday attendance averages about 18 members.

Pastor Randy Whitehead leads both congregations. Besides Sunday worship, Pastor Whitehead leads a women's Bible study.

"They are a fun community of believers to serve," said Pastor Whitehead. "They just enjoy being together as a congregation."

Members are connected to the Barnesville Food Pantry and serve there periodically.

All of the small church congregations in the area are very proud of the ways they are able to continue to sustain each church and spread the Gospel to others.



The Baker-Downer Westminster Presbyterian Church members are proud of the fact that the church building was constructed by members. Second and third generations of the original builders still attend the church. This is the cornerstone which was located outside the church building. Several years ago a new entry was added to the structure and the cornerstone ended up inside the building. The church, located in Baker, was completed in 1949.



North Immanuel Lutheran located between Pelican Rapids and Barnesville is led by a young and enthusiast minister. Pastor Ethan Fearing has been minister at North Immanuel for three years.



Rollag Lutheran Church in Rollag is unique among rural churches in the fact that it continues to grow. They have a large and vibrant Sunday school bringing in younger families.