

HEALTH

## Church membership on the decline in North Dakota, Minnesota

NEAR HILLSBORO, N.D. - The people of Aal Lutheran Church will celebrate its 140th anniversary on Aug. 11, the day it was founded here just off the bank of the Goose River between Mayville and Hillsboro before the towns existed, when roads or trai...



Gregg Kaldor, left, and Nanette Bagstad are among a handful of parishioners left at Aal Lutheran near Mayville. The church will close its doors this summer after its 140th anniversary on August 11. photo by Eric Hylden / Forum Communications Co.

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**By news@inforum.com**

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NEAR HILLSBORO, N.D. - The people of Aal Lutheran Church will celebrate its 140th anniversary on Aug. 11, the day it was founded here just off the bank of the Goose River between Mayville and

Hillsboro before the towns existed, when roads or train tracks still were a two-day walk away.

The same day this summer, the same people, heirs of those Norwegian Lutheran immigrants, will close the doors of this well-kept church.

"It got to the point where four or five families couldn't fund the whole bill," said Gregg Kaldor. "It was pretty much inevitable."

His great-grandparents, Christian and Ragnhild Kaldor, were part of a handful of families who came here in schooner wagons in the summer of 1871 from southern Minnesota. By harvest time in 1872, they organized Aal church with the Rev. Bernhard Hagboe.

No congregation in the state is older, although Catholic and Presbyterian mission work at Pembina dates back 200 years and more, state historians say.

Small, rural churches have been closing steadily for decades, but Aal's closing will take a lot of history with it, while illustrating a national trend.

A new survey by the Association of Religion Data Archives finds that fewer people, even in highly churched North Dakota and Minnesota, are attending religious services, mostly in the traditional denominations.

### **Empty pews**

In 2010, "religious adherents" made up 67 percent of North Dakota's population compared to 73 percent only a decade earlier, according to the survey released earlier this month.

Adherents include members of religious groups, whether they attended services regularly or not, and close family of members; some groups do not consider children full members, some do, and the study sought to standardize its count.

The main denominations in North Dakota - two Catholic dioceses and two corresponding synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - each have around 165,000 adherents, representing together half the state population but 73 percent of the religious adherents.

And each body lost nearly 7 percent of its people in the decade ended in 2010.

In Minnesota, adherents made up 56 percent of the population compared to 62 percent a decade earlier.

The same two denominations dominate in Minnesota, but the Catholic Church had 1.2 million adherents and the ELCA 738,000, together making up about a third of the population and 60 percent of adherents. Catholic membership fell nearly 9 percent and ELCA membership fell nearly 14 percent.

Nationwide, adherents made up 49 percent of the population compared to 50 percent a decade earlier. The Catholic Church lost 5 percent of its membership and the ELCA 18 percent.

Mainline Protestant denominations also lost adherents, down 21 percent in North Dakota, 16 percent in Minnesota and 12 percent nationwide.

### **Fallout of policies**

Bishop Bill Rindy in the ELCA's Eastern North Dakota Synod said fallout from the 2009 churchwide decision to allow clergy members to have same-sex partners and an earlier move to link with the Episcopal Church led to the loss of some congregations.

In the past five years or so, his synod has gone from 234 to 219 congregations. Across the Red River, the Northwest Minnesota Synod has gone from 271 congregations to 255.

Those "lost" congregations still exist, Rindy said, usually joining other groups.

Maybe a bigger, if quieter, problem is many congregations losing members and regular attendees, especially in rural areas and small towns, he said. Some churches in larger towns are thriving, he noted. "Calvary Lutheran in Grand Forks is looking at space issues because attendance is up."

Catholic leaders also see a downward trend, though the church puts grave emphasis on not missing weekly Mass.

"We certainly have decreased Mass attendance," said Monsignor David Baumgartner, vicar general of the Catholic Diocese of Crookston, Minn. "What we don't know is the cause. In many of our parishes, a death means nobody replaces them."

Mass attendance across the diocese fell 20.5 percent from 2000 to 2010, based on an October survey done every year. The number moved up slightly last year, Baumgartner said.

In the Catholic Diocese of Fargo, Mass attendance has gone from about 40 percent of registered members in 2003 to 34 percent in 2010, said the chancellor, the Rev. Luke Meyer.

### **Presbyterian 'crisis'**

Among mainline Protestant denominations in North Dakota, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stands out. From 2000 to 2010, it lost 37 percent of its people, exceeding even the big losses in the Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ, which lost 24 percent and 17 percent, respectively.

"It's been shocking for us, even," said the Rev. Deanna Reikow, a Mandan pastor and moderator of the 64 congregations in the Presbytery of the Northern Plains spread thin across North Dakota and northwest Minnesota, plus one church in Montana. "It is a crisis."

At the moment, the pulpits of the larger Presbyterian churches in the state's four major cities are empty, filled by interim pastors, Reikow said.

Controversy over leadership struggles the past few years in the Presbytery as well as the national decision last year to allow clergy to be in same-sex relationships are factors, she said.

"But the large part of (the decrease) has been due to the large number of elderly people in North Dakota," Reikow said. "For instance, we've had 10 or 11 funerals at our church the past year."

Still, the Presbytery's churches are determined to find new ways to meet people's changing spiritual needs, she said.

### **Against tradition**

Those spiritual needs, though, appear to be directed away from traditional churches.

John Helgeland, just retiring as a religion professor at North Dakota State University, has noticed for years the trends showing up in the survey. "I think the spirit of the age is, 'I don't need anybody - a church or religious professional - to guide my religious or spiritual life.'"

Meanwhile, a perhaps similar impulse contributes to growth among evangelical, non-liturgical groups, he said. "The notion that it's just you and me, Jesus," he said. "Then, 2,000 years of church history is really not that meaningful."

Indeed, smaller, conservative and evangelical denominations are seeing a boom in membership.

In North Dakota, adherents of evangelical Protestant denominations, including conservative evangelical Lutheran

denominations, grew 16 percent from 2000 to 2010. In Minnesota, those same denominations grew 36 percent.

Nationwide, their numbers grew 25 percent.

President Joel Egge of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, a small body based in Fergus Falls, Minn., with about 4,200 adherents in North Dakota and twice that many in Minnesota, credits spiritual and cultural factors.

"I observe in the culture a greater polarization that is being felt also in the spiritual and religious world," Egge said. "People are either more engaged or less engaged. It isn't so much of a community anymore where you 'have' to be in church."

Young people, especially, seem to be very committed if they are in church at all, Egge said. His group is seeing growth in the Oil Patch. Civic leaders in Williston say three new churches are being organized there.

### **Changing habits**

For many churches, like Aal, the generational shift has not been a boon to membership.

Kaldor and Aal President Nanette Bagstad grew up in the 1950s and 1960s going to church, Sunday school and choir practice every week.

"There was never a question whether you would go to church on Sunday morning," Bagstad said.

"You had to be sick," Kaldor agreed.

Bishop Rindy, who grew up in nearby Mayville, agreed.

"For previous generations, regular church attendance meant worshipping every Sunday or three out of four Sundays," he said.

"For younger generations, regular church attendance might be defined as once a month."

At 58, Kaldor is the youngest Aal member left.

Since its centennial in 1972, the church has alternated Sundays with nearby Norway Lutheran. That church, too, is closing this summer.

Where then will Kaldor go to church?

"I don't know," he said quietly.

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