

NEWS

## Country churches hurt as rural areas lose people

HILLSBORO, N.D. - Myron and Lorna Nysveen celebrate their 55th anniversary on June 16, but what should be a joyous day will be bittersweet for the Hillsboro couple.



Making up the majority of the existing congregation of Norway Lutheran Church are Lorna and Myron Nysveen, foreground, and Duane and Shirley Nysveen. The church, between Hillsboro and Mayville, N.D., will mark its closing June 16 with a special service. Dave Wallis | Forum Communications

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### By Pioneer staff reports

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HILLSBORO, N.D. - Myron and Lorna Nysveen celebrate their 55th anniversary on June 16, but what should be a joyous day will be bittersweet for the Hillsboro couple.

June 16 also marks the official closing of Norway Lutheran Church, where the couple were married and until recently, worshipped.

The 120-year-old Norway Lutheran adds its name to a growing list of rural Midwestern churches to close their doors.

For Myron, the church is more than a name or a building -- it's a big part of his family's history.

It was not only the church in which he was married, but also the church in which he was baptized, raised and confirmed. And it was the church his grandfather, Johannes Nysveen, and great-grandfather, Andreas P. Waslien, founded in 1892 as Norway Norsk Evangeliske Lutherske Menighed.

"I didn't like it, but there's nothing you can do about it," the 84-year-old Myron said of the decision to close. "I'm not a millionaire, so I can't keep it going myself."

Myron and his 80-year-old brother, Duane Nysveen, know it's not just money that keeps a church open.

"We knew it was coming," Duane said. "All of them small churches can't keep up when the farm disappears. People keep the doors open,"

Religious leaders agree -- the rural population drain and the higher ages of those who stay means fewer attendees at country churches.

"A church either runs out of people or runs out of money, to put it bluntly," said Bishop Larry Wohlrabe, head of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"A lot of our rural populations are made up of World War II-era folks, the Greatest Generation, the builders," said Bishop Bill Rindy of the ELCA's Eastern North Dakota Synod. "As they reduce in numbers, so do the people in those areas."

Rindy added that as farming operations increase in land size and technological advancement makes it easier for fewer people to do more work, farmers and workers are spread farther and farther apart.

"So we still see a decline in our small towns in our rural communities," he said.

"It's all population shift," said the Rev. Luke Meyer, chancellor for the Catholic Diocese of Fargo. "The telltale sign is when the public school closes, the parish isn't far behind because the families are going to move to a town near the school.

"It's a very sensitive issue. It's a tough thing," Meyer said about closing a church. "You think of the beautiful way people live their life in that particular rural place and this church represented a lot to them: the unity of the local community; their belief in God. There's a kind of sadness to see the rural decline."

"There used to be a farm every half-mile," Myron Nysveen said, sitting on the edge of a pew in the church recently.

"You used to be able to stand (outside) and see eight farms," Duane Nysveen added. "Now you can see three (houses) and they are not farms."

It wasn't just farms that were built close together. Wohlrabe points out that churches are often short distances from one another.

"Many were built as close as where the horses could go on a Sunday morning," he said. "I know places where you can stand on the steps of one country church and see another country church of the same denomination from where you're at."

Rindy points to Norway, Aal Lutheran and Gran Lutheran Churches, all in Norway Township, all two miles apart from each other.

"If you were to start congregations in today's world, with cars instead of horses, and the ability to travel that we have, you'd never start three congregations in the same township," Rindy said.

Norway Lutheran's congregation reached its peak in the 1940s and '50s, with between 12 and 15 families. Since 1972, congregations in Aal and Norway have been combined, alternating Sunday services.

In December, when Norway Lutheran ceased its weekly services, there were only eight members -- including those from Aal. Three of those eight are older than 90.

Not quite a month after the June 16 service marking the last worship at Norway, Aal also will close. Its final service will be Aug. 11, its 140th anniversary.

In the past five years or so, the Eastern North Dakota Synod has gone from 234 to 219 congregations.

On the Minnesota side, Wohlrabe said 12 churches have closed since 2001, leaving 244. But three of those closures have come in the past year.

Meyer said the number of Catholic parishes in eastern North Dakota has dropped from 158 in 2004 to 132 currently.

But 30 is the number to watch for in the diocese.

"Once it drops under 30 families, we start looking at merging that parish with another close-by parish," Meyer said, adding that they try to keep it so families don't have to drive farther than 30 miles to worship.

"At this point we're about maxed out there. So in the future, even though a parish may get below 30, if it means someone has to drive more than 30 miles, we'll keep it open. We have a couple of

parishes in that situation, where there may be less 30 families there, but it's the only church in the county."

As the population shifts in North Dakota, so may the fate of some rural churches farther west.

Rindy said that on the western edge of the synod, the oil boom is sending some families farther east to find affordable housing.

"Some of our small towns may start seeing a reversal in population trends," Rindy said. "That presents a whole new set of challenges and opportunities."

Meyer said as far east as Langdon, the priest at St. Alphonsus Catholic Church is seeing new families in the community, with the fathers driving to the oil patch every week to work.

"They come to a less overwhelmed place to go to school," Meyer said.

St. Alphonsus was involved in the last round of mergers, when it took in the shrinking worshipping body from Mount Carmel, 13 miles north, in 2008. At the same time, St. Joseph in Bremen merged with St. John the Evangelist in New Rockford, and Sacred Heart in Orrin merged with St. Therese the Little Flower in Rugby.

Meyer said that there are no immediate plans for further mergers but three parishes might have to be considered for it in the next few years, though he won't disclose which ones.

"It's not an easy process," Meyer said. "But some parishes come to us and say, 'We can't pay the bills anymore, we want to look into merging.' With other ones, we have to help lead them through that."

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