

North Dakota oil boom offers mission field

by [Maryann Eidemiller](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue

Sven Hauge goes every Thursday to the “man camps” surrounding the oil fields near Williston, North Dakota, and holds worship services that feature preaching, praying, and singing. Sometimes a few men show up, and sometimes nobody does.

“That can be discouraging if you put great importance on counting heads,” he said. “But most of us have learned that it isn’t about numbers.”

Three years ago, Hauge heard God calling him and other members of the Christian Motorcyclists Association to minister in the booming Bakken oil fields, where hydraulic fracturing and horizontal drilling pump out more than 450,000 barrels of oil a day.

North Dakota has passed Alaska in domestic oil production and is now second to Texas. Daily production by 2017 is expected to nearly triple to 1.2 million barrels. The United States Geological Survey estimates that 7.4 billion barrels of oil will be recovered before the boom plays out, and that’s already making the United States less dependent on foreign oil.

It takes a lot of people to fuel the boom—thousands of them coming to towns like Williston and Watford City, which are now stretched to meet the needs of this mostly transient population. Some live camped in rows on the prairie; others park RVs in makeshift campgrounds or live in their cars. Few can afford housing in town.

Jim Konsor arrived from South Dakota in 2012 to mine an igneous rock used in the oil fields.

“I heard some pretty tough stories,” he said. “There were so many needs.”

People had arrived hearing that they could make \$80,000 a year, but then realized that kind of pay goes to skilled workers employed directly by the oil companies. Laborers more likely make \$20 an hour or less, which doesn’t go far when monthly rent on an apartment can be \$2,500 or more.

Konsor returned to Watford City with his wife, Kathie, in 2013 and met with pastors, community leaders, and social service agencies to see what they could do. They asked the Dakotas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church for \$100,000—and got \$270,000.

“God told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to feed the hungry and take care of the least of our brothers in need,” Konsor said.

The couple drives a 29-foot converted RV stocked with donated household goods, clothing, blankets, coats, and shoes that they give away. One of the recipients was a pair of cousins, living in an RV with their husbands and children, 12 of them in all. There are times, Konsor said, when he tells people that it would be best if they just went back home.

Robert and Stephanie Newberry came up from Missouri nearly three years ago and settled in Watford City, where the population has exploded from 1,700 to 8,000 or more.

Robert Newberry, a self-described former bad dude from Georgia, survived childhood abuse, addictions, gangs, homelessness, and incarceration. At one time he was destitute and suicidal. Many men drawn to the oil fields are rough-and-tumble like he was.

“To be honest, I really didn’t want to be here,” he said. “The idea of 50-below-zero weather didn’t appeal to me, but God wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Newberry provides Bibles, shelter, food, and gas money for the men to get to and from work. He leads Celebrate Recovery, an ecumenical worldwide ministry to addicts that’s “kind of like AA and NA meets Jesus.” When invited, he’ll preach at local churches.

“I’m here to let people know that God is here, and he loves them,” he said.

Churches around town are holding Bible study groups, activities, and fellowship for men, women, and children. The local Catholic parish struggles to meet a surge in demand for all manner of sacraments.

“You might have 15 men who want to be part of the men’s group, but they can’t make it because of their schedules,” said Brian Gross of Epiphany Catholic Church. “They might not be able to attend mass on weekends and will come on days when

they can.”

He has seen an increase in people asking for help.

“They need money because they can’t get a job, or they need money for gas or for a bus ticket back home,” he said.

The locals, too, wrestle with the changing nature of their communities—overused roads, schools, and services. Some churches are expanding to meet the need. But no one knows when the boom will go bust.

“Where are we going to be ten years down the road?” Gross wondered. —Religion News Service

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