# Racked by fracking: Ministry challenges in the oil boom

by Amy Frykholm in the June 26, 2013 issue



Trinity Lutheran Church at Marley Crossing, outside Williston, North Dakota, sits on a vast plain at the foot of a butte near the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers. The tiny white clapboard building and parish hall were built in the 1950s near the railroad tracks by farmers and ranchers using donated labor and materials. When you see the church and its surroundings, the phrase “in the middle of nowhere” comes to mind.

But since North Dakota’s oil boom began in 2008, Marley Crossing is no longer a quiet, remote and beautiful kind of nowhere. The technology of hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking,” has enabled oil companies to drill for the millions of barrels of crude oil that lie in the shale in western North Dakota. More than 200 oil rigs operate in the state, producing about 20 million barrels of oil every month.

Hundreds of trucks carrying oil, sand and especially water—400 to 800 gallons of which is needed per day per well—now drive by the church every day, and some drivers use the church’s gravel parking lot as a place to sleep overnight. Every bit of land around the 50-member church, which was built on an easement, has been sold to various interests in the oil industry. Church members have heard rumors that plans are being made to build a refinery and a saltwater treatment facility nearby. (The brackish water used in hydraulic fracturing needs to be separated, after use, into recoverable oil, salt water for reinjection in a deep well and sludge for disposal.)

The land around the church was recently rezoned from agricultural to industrial use. Church members fought that decision. Susan Zimmerman, a longtime church member, recalls a resident telling the zoning commission, “Nobody goes to that church anyway.” A young woman in the congregation then stood up and asked, “How many nobodies does it take to make a somebody?” The church won an exemption to industrial zoning for its own plot, but members feel they are losing every other battle.

If Trinity were to give up its land, it would not have sufficient money to rebuild elsewhere. If it stays, it may eventually find itself surrounded by an industrial wasteland. “What if all of these companies are gone in five years?” wonders Zimmerman. “I am afraid they are just going to leave a mess.”

The land around the church changes hands so often—one day a South Korean company may own it, the next day a Norwegian one—that church members don’t know who their neighbors are or how to communicate with them. When a company asked if it could regravel the church’s parking lot, the church agreed, believing that the project would be of mutual benefit. The company proceeded to gravel every inch of the church’s land, including its grassy areas, and then park its trucks there.

“It was prairie grass,” said Zimmerman, “so I guess they didn’t notice it.” She continued: “We feel like we are losing all control. We are losing our community and our way of life.” Zimmerman quotes a church member who said, “What happened to my horizon?”

While members of Trinity see the oil boom as a threat, the leaders at New Hope Wesleyan Church in Williston see exciting new possibilities for growth and mission. Williston’s population has doubled in the past two years, and some predict that it will double again in the next five years. New Hope was founded in the 1970s and built on what was then the outskirts of town. It is now surrounded by housing developments and new construction.

Pastor Mike Skor, who arrived a little over two years ago, has big plans. The church has sketched out a 36,000-square-foot $7.5 million expansion that would double the seating capacity of the sanctuary and add a new wing for youth ministry.

A recent Sunday service featured a video of Skor standing on the edge of town next to rows of new houses and apartment complexes. He looked like a weatherman on the news channel in a scarf and coat, his hair tossing in the Dakota wind.

“These are your neighbors,” he said. “Every one of these apartments and houses represents a person for whom Jesus died. We are here to go to them. These are the people for whom it is our privilege to give ourselves away.” The particular focus of this video was to convince churchgoers to invite their neighbors to an Easter service at a community college whose auditorium could hold 2,000 people.

“Like Queen Esther, ‘we are here for such a time as this,’” Skor told me. “This is the direction that we are going to go. . . . It is not an option for us not to reach those that God is sending us.

“We keep saying in our church: ‘We can be missionaries to the world and not leave our front yard.’ The world is coming to us. Not that we aren’t working to be more globally minded, but so much of what we can do and be, we can do and be right here with our neighbors and coworkers. Some of them may go back to the Middle East to work in the oil fields. So we have a potential global reach here.”

Skor and others in the community believe that unlike other economic booms in North Dakota history, this one will add a significant and stable population.

But North Dakotans know the ups and downs of energy development. Oil development has been intermittent in North Dakota since oil was first discovered 60 years ago in what is called the Bakken formation in the western part of the state. The region experienced booms in coal and oil in the 1970s and 1980s, which were quickly followed by busts.

In the 1970s, then governor Art Link gave a speech that North Dakota writer Clay Jenkinson calls the “Gettysburg Address of North Dakota.” In that speech Link said: “We do not want to halt progress. We do not plan to be selfish and say, ‘North Dakota will not share its energy resources.’ No, we simply want to ensure the most effective and environmentally sound method of utilizing our precious coal and water resources for the benefit of the broadest number of people possible. . . . And when the landscape is quiet again . . . let those who follow and repopulate the land be able to say, ‘Our grandparents did their job well. The land is as good and, in some cases, better than before.’”

North Dakotans believe that energy extraction can be done in a way that is beneficial to North Dakota, its people, the land and future generations. The idea that the landscape will go “quiet again” is widely taken for granted. But the current pace of change is so intense, the means of extraction so different than what came before

and the numbers of people pouring in so large that no one knows if Link's ideal can be realized.

Jenkinson writes, "One thing is absolutely certain: the oil industry considers us just another extraction platform. I don't blame them. That is what one would expect. But we have the opportunity to teach them how we would like to be regarded."

Western North Dakota was largely populated by descendants of Norwegian and German immigrants as well as by members of the Chippewa tribe. The town of Williston, which until recently had a population of 11,000, boasted 12 different Lutheran churches and one Catholic parish. Baptist and Methodist churches also dotted the downtown, along with a JCPenney department store and government buildings. Before 2008 the region was stagnating, with young people leaving and rural towns disappearing. A survey in 2005 predicted a 5 percent decline in population for the state. Now the population is booming with a 9.3 percent growth in 2011. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Williston is the "fastest growing micro region" in the nation.

For many of the mainline churches in Williston, the question posed by the oil boom is: How do we relate to our new neighbors? A litany at First Lutheran Church, the largest Protestant church in town, calls on members to "stretch out hands toward the world God has saved." Three years ago, First Lutheran put this vision into action by joining with two other congregations that belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a Roman Catholic parish to host a series of meals to "welcome the stranger" in their community.

The meal, called Banquet West, is held on Sunday nights in First Lutheran's parish hall. Each church takes one turn a month preparing the meal, which is served banquet style at nicely decorated tables. As organizers had hoped, on Sunday nights the tables are crowded with both longtime Williston residents and newcomers.

On the Sunday evening that I visited Banquet West, I sat across from a man named Dave who had come from Montana to Williston seeking work in the oil fields. He had spent his first few months in Williston sleeping in a sleeping bag along the side of a road. "It is a really good sleeping bag," he said.

After a few weeks of work, Dave had saved enough money to buy a Jeep, and he now sleeps in it. When he has days off, he takes the train as far east as he can and finds a cheap motel room in another city where he showers and treats himself to

dinner.

On the other side of me sat a woman named Norma who has lived in Williston for decades, raised her children here and has deep connections to the land and to the town. Norma did not seem happy about the changes in Williston. She said she and her husband would like to sell their home and move into something smaller, but the rents are so high in Williston that they feel they would be foolish to try. Stories are frequently told of older people who sell their homes and then find their rents doubling and even tripling or find that their newly rented apartments have been turned into condominiums they cannot afford to buy.

Conversation between longtime residents and those recently arrived can be strained. Pastor Muriel Lippert—whose Good Shepherd Lutheran parish was serving the meal that night (chicken with stuffing, green beans, chocolate sheet cake)—told the story of lending a pen to a man in the bank one day. She casually asked where he was from. He named his hometown in Montana and then added, “I bet you wish we’d all go away, don’t you?” “How sad,” Lippert commented, “that that is the message he had gotten from us.”

One of the purposes of Banquet West is to break down those barriers with the use of food and ever-flowing coffee. A man named Harry, who said he was from “up the Yellowstone River,” broke into the general banter to tell me to be sure to write that people wait around for seconds because the food is always excellent. After three years, Banquet West is serving dinner to an average of 135 people each Sunday and has involved more than 15 community groups, including oil-related companies like Target Logistics, a workforce housing company.

Warmth and hospitality can be difficult to find during a Williston winter, but some churches, along with the area’s Salvation Army, are busy trying to meet basic needs. Pastor Mark Britton of Faith United Methodist tells of a young man who came to see him who had no coat, gloves or hat. “He had a hoodie on—that was it.” He had been fired from his job, evicted from the company-owned house where he had lived and was trying to survive 15 below zero weather.

“He found one place to warm up for a little bit, but then they chased him out and he just wandered around. His hands were pretty badly frostbitten. He came in and we gave him a coat and some gloves. Then I just bought him a train ticket. I said, ‘Go as far south and west as you can.’ A guy like that could easily have died of exposure

that night. Walking, driving, getting off the train—I see them all the time, people with all their possessions trying figure out what they are going to do and where they are going to stay." Britton said that in this town without a homeless shelter, people can at least come to the church and find the door open.

Concordia Lutheran Church, a Missouri Synod congregation, started an impromptu Overnighters Program on a bitter night in 2011 when a man came to Pastor Jay Reinke's office saying he had nowhere to sleep other than his car. Reinke offered him a spot on the church's floor. The next day the man found a job but continued to sleep at the church. Word spread, and before long the church was hosting up to 30 men a night.

Not everyone at Concordia thinks this is a good idea. The church's board has approved the program for only a six-month period. In March, the program was narrowly reapproved—and not without vocal dissent. Reinke encourages his congregation to see the men sleeping in the church as gifts.

"When I see them come in," he said, "I always think, 'Oh, Lord, not another one.' But then I say, 'You are a gift. You are a gift to this community. You are a gift to Williston. Welcome to North Dakota.' One of the things I don't think people understand is that these are people just trying to survive. They've lost homes.

"One of the guys sitting in church this morning was a black man from Nigeria. His wife in Nigeria is due to give birth next month. He got his engineering degree in Nigeria. He got his M.B.A. at the University of Wales in Cardiff and a graduate engineering degree at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. And he is sleeping in the corner of this room. I feel like I should genuflect in the presence of a man like that. I got on the phone last night with his wife in Nigeria. She expressed gratitude that her husband has a place to live."

Reinke admits that the Overnighters Program has perhaps taken "a little too much my life" and that as a result he may have neglected his congregation. But Overnighters has also enlivened his ministry, and on the Sunday I was in church, I could see that a dozen or so men from the program were present, and were trying to follow the Lutheran service.

Reinke thinks the Overnighters Program has introduced change to the congregation "at the deepest level." He recognizes that with the community changing so rapidly around them, some people do not want their church to change. But "I don't get to

choose who my neighbors are. They show up, and God has changed my life because they are on my doorstep. . . . I consider it holy ground to have these conversations."

The pace of change that Concordia has experienced is evident everywhere. "In truth," said First Lutheran's pastor Martin Mock, "our church has been too inwardly focused. It's been a little too much about us and not enough about our neighbor."

Not many of these new neighbors are prospective church members, however—at least not in the current situation. Sabbath time for oil field workers is rare, and when it does occur it often occurs far from Williston.

Pastor Ashley Olinger of Cornerstone First Baptist Church said that his congregation "literally looks different" every week. Oil field workers Virgil Lewis and Roger Scott, who attended Cornerstone Baptist that Sunday, agreed. Even though both call themselves believers, they said their schedules only occasionally allow time for church. Both are committed to going home to see their families whenever they can.

While the dream of some Williston residents and churches is that people will move their families to Williston and settle in, the daily reality for oil workers is very different. The vast majority of them work on a rotating schedule—on for a few weeks, then off for a few weeks. When working, they often put in 80 to 100 hours a week, then travel home to see families in Oklahoma, Michigan or Texas. Lippert said, "We have to get used to the fact that people are not coming to stay."

Most workers have a short-term plan: they aim to work from six months to three years in the oil fields to pay off their debts, save some money and then hope the economy improves and they can get work back home. The line at the Western Union office on Fridays is a long one, as workers wire money back to their families.

Meanwhile, prices in Williston are exploding. Rent for a small apartment is more than $2,000 a month, and even the price of milk is inflated. Pat Wright, a longtime member at First Lutheran, said she knows of several oil workers who have moved their families to North Dakota but have chosen to live in rural towns where rents are cheaper, even though that means a commute of four or five hours.

When I asked Virgil Lewis, an oil worker attending Cornerstone Baptist, if he would move his family to Williston from Houston, he studied me for a few moments and then said, "It's complicated." Most newcomers, Zimmerman of Trinity Lutheran points out, would not have come were it not for a bad national economy. Pat

Wright's husband Ron, a chiropractor, said that he sees oil workers every day whose bodies are aching from the toilsome work. "Men are in real pain when they come in. The physical and mental toll of the work is tremendous. It is not sustainable."

The religious backgrounds of the people coming to Williston vary. Many are Jehovah Witnesses or Mormons from western states, many come from evangelical traditions, and many more are indifferent to church altogether. First Lutheran in Williston hosted a seminar called "Fracking the World with Hope" at which ELCA outreach director Ruben Duran told congregants that the church has to reenvision itself from the margins of the society. It can no longer expect the culture to function "synergistically" with the church. Though this change is hard, he said, it is promising. From the margins, "we are free for the first time in centuries to shape our message without the culture telling us what we have to say—or be."

If longtime churchpeople in Williston feel a bit marginal, so do many newcomers. On the airplane flying into Williston, two men behind me were conversing: "I hate Williston," one said. The other one said, with more emphasis, "I *hate* Williston." Across the aisle, a man drinking his third Scotch said to the flight attendant: "I am going to be stuck up in Williston."

It's painful for residents to hear their hometown derided. They are already familiar enough with outsiders' tendency to dismiss North Dakota. Kathleen Norris, author of the best-selling 1993 memoir *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, said, "In an odd and uncomfortable way, I feel that some of what I said in Dakota has been vindicated: that when it comes to natural resources—gold in the 1880s, now oil and natural gas—the rest of the country would not care about the effects on the people living out there, because it's kind of America's 'empty quarter.'"

Residents can't help seeing the social changes they experience as a form of loss. On the evening that I arrived in Williston, the tiny airport was abuzz with talk of a shooting that had taken place downtown the night before. There had also been a stabbing at a crew camp; 17 tires had been slashed at a local car dealership; and a man was found with bomb-making equipment at an oil-related business—all within the last few weeks. When I met Ron and Pat Wright at a packed Applebee's restaurant, they scanned the room and said there were only two people they recognized. "You can't imagine how different this is for us. Even two years ago, we would have known everyone in this room."

The pace and extent of the oil boom seem to have far outstripped everyone's plans. No one knows what the future will hold. Recent headlines said, "Is North Dakota's Miraculous Boom Already Over?" and "Bakken Oil Boom Might Last 100 Years." So no one knows what to plan for. The new construction could be abandoned overnight, or the oil economy could stabilize and leave Williston positioned for a prosperous future.

In the meantime, the churchpeople in Williston face their own version of the question posed by Art Link: Will church members of another generation be able to say, "Our grandparents did their job well"?