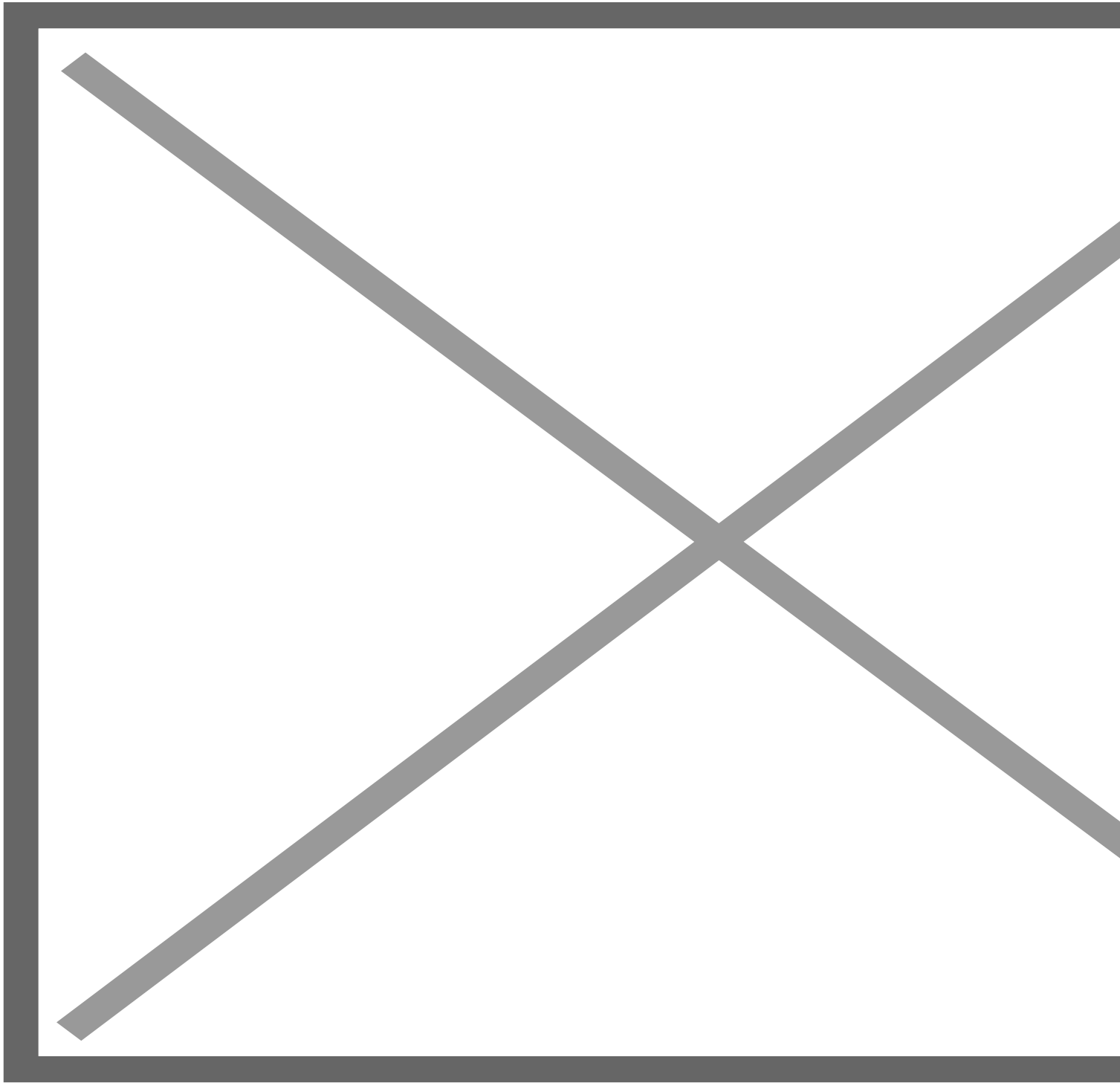


How rural churches in the Pacific Northwest are sharing pastors across denominations

by [Emma Maple](#)

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An interdenominational Ash Wednesday service at First Presbyterian Church in Sandpoint, Idaho, in 2023. From left: Paul Graves, a UMC pastor; Catherine Lyle, a UMC pastor; Andy Kenally, a PCUSA pastor; and Steve Neuder, a PCUSA pastor. (Courtesy photo)

Across the Pacific Northwest, rural churches from mainline denominations are combating declining attendance and escalating costs through a novel solution: pastor sharing.

“What we’re finding is it’s getting harder to attract clergy to move to rural communities, particularly for part-time positions,” said Geoff Helton, superintendent of the United Methodist Church Pacific Northwest Conference—Inland & Seven Rivers Missional District. “We’ve begun, where we can, sharing clergy.”

The biggest benefits of pastor sharing that many people have reported are the way it allows both congregations to save costs and attract ministers to rural areas.

That’s the situation for Roberta Smyth, who serves at Zion Lutheran, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation, and a United Methodist Church in La Grande, Oregon. Both churches, located in a small, rural area, have about 20 households that regularly attend services.

“Neither could afford a full-time pastor,” Smyth said.

For a short time before she was called to the Methodist church, she was working half-time at the Lutheran church. Without many other job opportunities in the rural area that could have supported her work as a pastor, she said she would have had to start looking for another call had she not been able to also serve as a Methodist pastor half-time.

“It was just fortunate for me that there was an opening there,” Smyth said.

Jake Schumacher, who is ordained in the ELCA, currently serves both Immanuel Lutheran Church in Grandview, Washington, and Sunnyside Presbyterian Church in Sunnyside, Washington. Combined, both churches have an average congregational size of about 65 people, he said.

The two congregations decided to share Schumacher as pastor primarily for financial reasons, he said. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, both churches struggled to balance their budgets. By splitting the cost of a pastor’s salary, they’ve since been able to recover from those losses.

“That’s been really nice,” he said. “It feels really good to be more focused on ministry and generosity than always worried about the bottom line.”

How interdenominational ministries work

Several mainline denominations have overarching policies about pastor sharing, Smyth said. For example, ELCA pastors are able to serve at Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, Episcopal, and Moravian churches.

The UMC is in full communion with the Moravian Church, the ELCA, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the African Union Methodist Protestant Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church.

The Episcopal Church will vote on full communion with the UMC at its 2027 general convention.

“Our denominations have sort of created these relationships ahead of time,” Schumacher said. “That makes it a lot easier.”

Pastors serving interdenominationally have said that, while there are theological differences between mainline Christian traditions, the churches they shepherd tend to have more things in common than areas they differ.

“For most of these mainline denominations, the differences in theology [are] usually more finely pointed than you would necessarily cover in a sermon,” Smyth said.

The biggest tension many pastors reported wrestling with is the different ways that worship is practiced across different Christian traditions.

Some denominations are more structured and liturgical, with common ways of worshipping that are uniformly practiced across different congregations. Others have looser worship structures with more room for creativity and direction from the pastor.

Pastor sharing, however, is helping to tear down perceived differences between the denominations, Schumacher said.

“We’re realizing, ‘Oh, we can’t just be an island,’” Schumacher said.

Sharing resources

Many rural churches go beyond sharing pastors and also share resources and support across denominations. Catherine Lyle, who is serving as the interim pastor for the First Presbyterian Church and the permanent pastor for the UMC in Sandpoint, Idaho, said many churches in her area work together to share resources and support.

“Collaborative ministries [are] key to rural ministries,” Lyle said.

The ELCA’s Northwest Intermountain Synod has been intentionally building interdenominational relationships [with the help of a grant](#) from the [CaSTLE Project](#), an initiative of Wartburg Theological Seminary that works to revitalize rural ministry. The grant allowed the synod to host events that bring together denominational heads to discuss what is going on in their areas and brainstorm ways to partner.

The group, which is still in its infancy, plans to meet in August to explore what the congregations can work on together, said Meggan Manlove, bishop of the Northwest Intermountain Synod.

Manlove said that Lutherans share resources, like pastors, as a way to be good stewards of the church.

“As rural communities continue to shrink for so many reasons, so do the congregational populations,” Manlove said. “But we want the life-giving gospel to keep being proclaimed in those areas, and it makes so much sense to partner with our full communion partners.” — F?VS

This article has been edited to clarify that the United Methodist Church is not in full communion with the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Church of Christ, or the Episcopal Church.