

High fidelity: Dogged devotion

by [Bill McKibben](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

I live in the north country mountains, where winter begins in late October and gives up, some years, in early May. That means you come to church half the year in boots—heavy boots, in case you get stuck in a snowbank on the way. Which means, in turn, that the carpet on the floor better be some shade of brown.

Two or three times in my years there I've vacuumed the church. (Not very often, because we tend to divide up jobs along Traditional Gender Lines. Men make sure the furnace is turned up, change the storm windows, lift heavy things, paint, put away folding chairs, shovel the stairs. Women do everything else.) The first time I vacuumed I was merrily buzzing away between the pews, listening to the random click-clack of sand disappearing up the hose, when all of a sudden the noise trebled—click-click-click, like a Geiger counter in a uranium mine.

At that moment I was vacuuming beneath the third pew right along the center aisle. Right where Frank and Jean have been sitting every single Sunday that I can remember. I believe that Frank and Jean began attending our congregation the Sunday after the Council of Nicea. Each time they claim the same spot.

I kept vacuuming, hoovering up the same steady background level of sand, until I reached the sixth pew, against the right wall, where Velda and Don sit each Sunday—each Sunday they possibly can, that is, as both of them have been as much in the hospital as out lately. Again my Geiger counter went off. I decided that instead of radioactivity, it was measuring something else. Fidelity.

“Spirituality” is our watchword at the moment, of course. And rightly so. But Woody Allen had a point when he said that 90 percent of life consists in just showing up.

Consider what it means to belong to the same rural Methodist church for 60 or 70 years. Because Methodist central command insists on changing preachers about as frequently as Sheraton changes sheets, and because small, poor, rural congregations serve as practice ground for the rawest seminary graduates, anyone sitting in the pews for a decade or two sees a head-spinning mix of styles, theologies

and talents.

When I first arrived, the incumbent pastor was a jailhouse convert—a holy roller with a pinkie ring who returned whence he had come after embezzling a widow's insurance. Since then we've had wonderful people in the pulpit—some conservatives, some progressives. Some of them illustrated their sermons with examples taken from some preacher's helper that must have been published in 1921 because the anecdotes all involved World War I. We've taken communion by every method short of scuba diving into a tank of wine. We had one truly great preacher. She was young, smart, funny, full of love, able to talk to young and old, able to afflict the few of us who were comfortable while simultaneously comforting the many afflicted. And she hadn't been there a month before we were, all of us, worried sick about what it was going to be like when, inevitably, she would have to leave. Though none of us would have traded her years for anything, in certain ways it was the hardest passage of all.

Through it all Don and Velda and Frank and Jean never wavered. They might not have liked some new theological twist or liturgical gambit, but they didn't complain very much. (Not even when every other pastor would reinstitute the Greeting of the Neighbors, or the Passing of the Peace, or whatever they called it—a practice that makes less sense when the same 15 people are there every week, and you've greeted them when you came in, and you're going to greet them again at coffee hour.) And they kept doing the fairly awesome amount of labor even a poor small church requires if it is to keep going.

It's easy to say that all this doesn't add up to a daring relationship with God, that it's Mary and Martha come to life, that routine can suck the meaning out of something as bracing as the gospel. But those of us who've claimed this place were attracted by the sheer dogged devotion of the regulars.

My generation has been good at many things, but tenacity—faithfulness—is not one of them. Sometimes, in fact, we simply want too much. Like marriages that complete us, fulfill us in every way, make us whole, instead of marriages where, on most days, it's enough to be living faithfully together, adding another increment of quotidian devotion, giving each other the benefit of the doubt. Or like religious *experiences*, instead of the experience of being religious. I have no real sense of what it might have felt like to inhabit the medieval world, when the church was simply the air one breathed, the environment in which one lived. Or rather, what sense of that world I

have comes from watching people like Frank and Jean and Don and Velda.

One spring day some years ago, when Don and I had finished taking down the storm windows, we decided to climb up into the steeple on a rickety ladder so that we could take in the view across our small town. We could see the house where he'd grown up, and the graveyard where many generations of his ancestors were buried. And while we were up there Don showed me something else—the place he had carved his initials, and Velda's. Sometime in the 1920s, when they were in grade school.