



After the homilies, the Catholics leave to finish the Mass in another room. They alternate: one week Catholics leave; the next week, the Lutherans.

Sentinel photos by Denise Hogan

Grassroots ecumenism at work in Catholic-Lutheran parish

BEAVERTON — A small community of Christians in this suburban city has succeeded where centuries of church history have failed.

For 10 years, Lutheran and Roman Catholic members of Mission of the Atonement have worshiped together week in and week out. They are a parish astride denominational lines, one of only two such congregations in the nation.

The mission observed its 10th anniversary last Sunday, bringing together not only its diverse population, but a bishop from each of the traditions. Now, say church leaders, the mission's task is to grow and speak out.

"There is a great spirit of unity today even though we are not canonically united," says Auxiliary Bishop Kenneth Steiner, who also presided at the mission's opening in July 1986. "We talk together and pray together and do ministry together. After our Christian bodies have been separated for more than 450 years, 10 years seems like not a long time. But it is a first step. The mission is a sign for the rest of us of striving toward unity."

Bishop Steiner called on Christians in Oregon to take a look at small towns across the state. There, he says, churches unite joyfully even if out of necessity. Denominations jointly sponsor shelters, soup kitchens and pregnancy help centers. They also hold regular ecumenical prayer services.

"I'm pleased that the mission is there," says Bishop Paul Swanson, Oregon prelate of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "God's spirit has been working among them and they've kept it alive for the past 10 years. It is a model for what is possible in ecumenical relationships. Most congregations are involved in some ecumenical endeavors, but these are face-to-face, weekend-to-weekend involvements."

In the coming decade, the mission's challenge will probably reach out to prospective new members, says Swanson. His synod covers the

entire state of Oregon, where there are 50,000 baptized Lutherans and 122 congregations.

"I think the mission needs to work hard at telling their story and issuing invitations," Bishop Swanson says.

Each Sunday, the Lutherans and Catholics convene in their 1950s-vintage church, which is characterized by floor-to-ceiling murals. The paintings celebrate the Gospels and the unswerving love of God, two of the countless deposits of faith the denominations hold in common.

Each week, the mission's parishioners pray together, listen to Scripture and sit side by side during the homily. Though they part along denominational lines for the Eucharist, these Protestants and Catholics reconvene later for cookies and coffee, leaving theological differences behind.

The Lutheran Church has its origins in the early 16th century, when an Augustinian priest named Martin Luther protested matters of Catholic belief and practice, including the sale of indulgences. Though Luther himself seldom used the words "Reformation" or "Protestant," his convictions and profound differences with Rome began a major rift as Western Christendom rapidly chose sides between him and Pope Leo X.

At Mission of the Atonement, neither Catholics nor Lutherans lose their traditions, members say. On the contrary, the joint venture helps them deepen their commitment to their particular church.

Couples married across denominations find a haven at the mission, where they can worship together and remain utterly faithful to Lutheran and Catholicism.

"Both bishops were very supportive, calling us to recognize and continue the work God is doing among us," says Franciscan Father Mathias Tumulty, Catholic priest-moderator. "They wanted to emphasize that this is a work God is doing. We were encouraged to press on in our ecumenical task. We felt really embraced and encouraged and supported."



Children gather for children's homily.

During the anniversary Mass, children were shown a backpack that looked stuffed and heavy. When they lifted it, they found it surprisingly light. Upon opening the pack, the children found dozens of flowers in dozens of colors.

The pack, said children's homilist Linda Dunn, symbolizes the ecumenical burden Christians carry. It can seem heavy, but contains the promise of a better world if Christians allow the Lord's reconciling love to bring them together.

On Sunday, the congregation is expected to announce that Rev. Laurie Larson-Caesar is the primary candidate to serve as Lutheran pastor of the mission.

Larson-Caesar, a 20-something cleric, has been interviewed by a committee from the mission. Educated at Harvard and Stanford, she is expected to give a boost to the



Different denominations, different handouts; hymnals for everyone.

Lutheran community, has gone without a pastor for about a year.

Larson-Caesar is no stranger to ecumenism. Her husband is a Presbyterian minister who has been

working in Pendleton.

"We need to grow," says Leon Pike, administrator of the mission. "We have remained pretty much the same size for five or six years."