

Lonely in Dakota: A celebration of ministry in the waning places

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

Baltimore, our declining but still 12th-largest city, has a larger population than the entire state of North Dakota, which has 634,366 people. The state's Divide County takes up a lot of space on the map, but its population declined from 9,636 in 1930 to 2,208 (down 77 percent) today. You could fit those people into any urban block.

That change has to do with growth, prosperity and success. You can make the front page if you entertain and attract young urbanites to churches—and why not?—but it's harder to summon attention to chaplaincies among seniors in their dwindling years, when they need spiritual counsel most. You can get the business section to write of the boom among the newly planted congregations in exurbia, but who pays attention to those who stick around and pour imagination and faith and hope into small congregations that have been buffeted by neighborhood changes?

I looked up North Dakota's Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations listed in the 2004 Yearbook. There are a valiant 55 communicants at pastorless Ambrose, 784 in town and 69 in country at Crosby. Fortuna has 117 members, Grenora 159, Noonan 172. All of them have made contributions to "benevolences," and my hunch is that the bishop and staff scramble to supply pastoral help. It's unlikely that any of these places get featured unless in occasional photography exhibits of ghost church buildings in ghost towns.

All this is on my mind because of Richard Rubin's article in the April 9 *New York Times Magazine*. "Can the loneliest corner of North Dakota attract anyone to go live there?" Leaders try. At Crosby—with those two Lutheran churches—they give away lots and houses to newcomers who promise to stay. Nothing will help Hanks, however, which is down to a population of one, Debra Quarne, who says she likes the seclusion but adds: "It's sad." Rubin says that "churches are signs of a fading past; empty schools are signs of a fading future." In 1991 one woman wrote, "We don't have anything anymore. We don't have a church. Everything is gone." Bernie

Arcand of Ray, a town of 500, speaks of the “superfriendly” folk. “It’s a great place to raise your kids, but once the kids are graduated from college, there are no jobs for them.”

The kids head to the Sunbelt, where there are few churches of their denomination, then marry into the culture and join the booming churches there. If you were choosing a place to plant churches to meet demographic needs in this century, you could not have done worse than the Rust Belt and the Farm Belt, where my Lutheran kin congregated.

Now some words to correct impressions I may have made: First, it’s bad stewardship to expect to cover every 55-member outpost in all places and all denominations. Second, I am not suggesting that there is villainy in the population shifts. Many shifts are inevitable because of climate, changes in agriculture, etc. Third, while this is a celebration of ministry among the waning places, it is not a critique of the waxing places.

I suggest that in prayers for “all sorts and conditions” of people, we remember the places where the church-growth advice does not help. Take Rule Number One: “Show people you are optimistic; double the size of your church parking lot.” Most of North Dakota is a parking lot. Instead, refer to the Four Gospels, which show Jesus meeting every person and every circumstance as contexts for discernment and care. Maybe Divide County, North Dakota, can serve, for one week at least, as a place to keep in mind as the Easter church-attendance crowds fade away.

Then reread Kathleen Norris’s *Dakota*, a spiritual reflection by someone who cares.