

Ministry with the Overnighters

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One key challenge for [churches in the North Dakota oil boom](#) is how to respond to the needs of many new residents. Jay Reinke, pastor of Concordia Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, runs a program out of his church called the Overnighters

On a bitter night two years ago, a man came to Pastor Reinke's office asking for a bus ticket out of town. He was about to start a new job—but he had nowhere to stay for the night and it was too cold to sleep outside. He had had it with the instability of his situation. "Why don't you just spend the night here?" Reinke said, with a spontaneity that he attributes to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Inadvertently, the Overnighters program was born.

Reinke is an affable and passionate man, with both a scholar's seriousness and a pastoral warmth. He is as comfortable protesting for causes he believes in—he is passionately anti-abortion and pro-gun—as he is discussing theology. He loves to spend evenings with the "Overnighters" talking about doctrine and Christian meaning.

The Overnighters program took him and the entire church by surprise. Word quickly spread. Pretty soon, men in need of a place to stay were sleeping in the youth room and fellowship hall. Some people in the church were rankled. The woman who cleaned the church came to him and said, "Pastor, it smells like a boy's locker room in [the youth room] and my kids don't want to go in there." Reinke banned the Overnighters from the youth room, but he has not been able to quell criticism.

The church council decided that they would renew the Overnighters program every six months. The most recent vote took place in March of this year. On the day of the vote, Reinke led me back to his office and pointed out the various suitcases that had been left by people who had come through. Reinke's ministry may not have captured the imagination of everyone in his congregation, but it has captured the imagination of reporters and filmmakers from around the globe. Reuters, *Christianity Today*, a German film team, *New Africa*, the *London Times* and many others have all

come looking for him. A man named Jessie Moss is making a documentary. Larry the Cable Guy wanted to come, but Reinke and the church said no. Somebody named Dan from Iowa is documenting the oil boom for the Library of Congress and is spending time with the Overnights.

Reinke admits that the Overnights program has hijacked some of his normal pastoring time, but what is so compelling for him is the connection he now makes with people from around the globe. The Overnights join the worship on Sunday; they engage him in conversation late into the night; they bring the outside world to Williston. He says, "One of the difficulties I have as a pastor is that you go by to see somebody, and they don't really want you to visit. I am not always welcome as a pastor. I like this place because they like me when I am here. I am like a house father or something."

Perhaps it is this picture of a pastor and a church changing and being changed that brings the film crews from around the world. Not to mention the incongruous sight of a man padding in his slippers down the Sunday school hallway late at night and setting up his bedding in the fellowship hall.