



# On the Road Again!

*An interview with Linda Baldock, pastor of a 3-point charge.*

**CR:** Who are you and how did you come to ministry, Linda?

**LB:** I grew up on a farm in Minnesota, went to college at Moorhead, and graduated with a degree in social work. My first job was in a nursing home in a small town in North Dakota. After a few years, I went back to school to be licensed in special education. In 1993, my husband and I sold our house and went to Iowa where I served two small town churches, while attending Saint Paul School of Theology. Upon graduation in 1997, we moved to Pembina, North Dakota, where we have been ever since.

**CR:** Tell me about the churches you serve.

**LB:** I serve three churches. One is in Pembina, a town of 640 people. Humboldt is in Minnesota, actually part of the Dakotas Conference, a town of 60 people, and Joliette, North Dakota has less than 20 people living there. We are on the Canada, North Dakota, Minnesota border and right on the Red River. The communities are stable to declining. On the Minnesota side, farm crops and prices have been poor for the last several years, so there has been a loss of families. Pembina has more empty houses and apartments now than when we came 4 years ago. The main employer in Pembina is a bus man-

ufacturer. It fluctuates from lay-offs to over-time to lay-off, so it isn't very stable for newer employees. The Joliette and Pembina congregations have maintained membership and worship attendance, with a small amount of growth. Humboldt has had a loss due to families moving.



**CR:** What goals did you set for your ministry with these three small membership churches?

**LB:** We have revived a UMYF group for Pembina and Joliette, have gone on work/fun trips to the Twin

Cities with the youth, which I think have benefited them, as they still talk about staying upstairs from a homeless shelter and being able to hear gun fire out in the street! **One of my goals has been to help not only the young people, but everyone experience God in new and different ways—** thus we have taken confirmation class trips to Winnipeg for a synagogue service, now have an adult group working through the *Christian Believer* study, and we are working on contemporary worship with video and drama.

**CR:** How do the three churches relate to each other?

**LB:** We have a three point charge, one treasurer who pays the charge bills and the pastor. We worship together every 5th Sunday (month with 5 Sundays); our confirmation classes meet together (which can be tricky in scheduling with 3 - 4 schools involved); one church hosts VBS and all the churches provide kids and teachers; we have joint Lenten services, and Easter Sunrise services. All three churches work together on a Shrove Tuesday pancake supper to raise money for the parsonage street tax. There was a lot of conflict among the churches when we came, partially because of the perception that the PPR and Conference staff had not treated the previous pastor well. There

was some healing that had to take place, but now it seems folks are more than willing to attend one another's church and events.

**CR:** What are some of your greatest challenges?

**LB:** Time and distance! The nursing homes and hospitals are 35 - 75 miles away, the Sunday morning worship circuit is a total of 44 miles, with worship at 8:45, 10, and 11:15 a.m. So it is difficult to do something special in each church on any one Sunday, without running late for the next service.

To make pastoral visits, I cover an area from Fargo, over two hours away, to a town in Canada, so visitation takes careful planning.

Another challenge is my desire to lead the congregations into more contemporary worship but not having some of the resources, like people who play drums, horns, etc. or a large screen TV with laptop to project images.

**Youth ministry is a particular challenge in small churches.** We have tried working together among the three churches, but often find it difficult with conflicting sports schedules and school schedules. The youth in all three churches are active, read scripture, help serve at events, act as ushers, and in some cases serve on committees. But we find that those in small schools are like those in small churches, each has more than one job or activity, so there just isn't time for the kids to be in or at everything.

**CR:** What are your congregations' strengths? Are there specific ministries which are "hallmarks" of your congregations?

**LB:** Even though we are small, we have a "can do" attitude about everything from building repair to trying new things to putting on special events. Each church seems to have a special strength. Joliette is very mission oriented; Humboldt is committed to youth; and people at Pembina are able to work well together on projects.

Joliette sent 8 people to Tucson Metropolitan Ministries in February on a Volunteers in Mission trip and plans to make TMM an ongoing mission project. We have already sent \$400 for needed equipment.

Humboldt's Heavenly Disciples, UMYF and UMW are very active in serving the community. As the only church in town, the church hall is used as a community center.

Pembina's hallmark is its history and its willingness to serve the community. Recently the confirmation class helped the congregation celebrate a Passover meal. They come together to do things not just for the church, but for the community. Pembina is the church most eager to study the Word and willing to commit to a study like *Christian Believer*.

**CR:** How do you measure "success" in your ministry?

**LB:** When I see people get excited about serving God, or when I hear someone say, "I hadn't thought about it that way before" or "I have come to a much greater appreciation of the Old

Testament," I know God is at work in our midst.

**CR:** Where do you find your own spiritual and emotional nurture?

**LB:** I use various devotional resources, try to spend time daily in private prayer and meditation. I enjoy attending conference events where there is corporate worship, as that feeds my soul.

**Spending so many hours on the road gives me time to contemplate and to pray.** I always pray, "Lord, put the words in my mouth that you want me to say to this person or about that situation" when I get there."

When I need help with specific problems or challenges, I call my District Superintendent, other Conference officers, or I call or e-mail friends and share situations or feelings. And I have a shelf full of rural ministry related books that I go back to from time to time.

**CR:** What are the three most important things you would want a new pastor of a small membership church to know?

**LB:** The people want to be loved. God is here. And small is beautiful, because you get to know the people and their stories. Love the people, get involved in the community, and don't take yourself too seriously! □