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The congregation of the First United Methodist Church in Southbridge sang a hymn last week during the Sunday morning service. The church seen its membership decline in recent years.

Here's the church, but where are the people?

Tiny Protestant parishes cling to life

By Michael Paulson
GLOBE STAFF

SOUTHBIDGE — There was a time when the First United Methodist Church here was a hub of activity, with a booming school, regular church suppers, and worshippers who packed the pews of the white steepled building.

No more. The congregation has been dwindling for years and now is barely hanging on.

On a recent Sunday, just five worshippers gathered in the 300-seat church to pray at the 11 a.m. service. The Rev. Peggy Kieras sat alone by the grand wooden pulpit,

cradling a remote control for the compact disc player that provides music for hymns, just underneath the towering pipes of the unused organ.

"I have a sliding scale number," she said, explaining how the size of the congregation governs how she presides during worship. "If it's over four, I preach from the pulpit. If it's less than four, I sit in a pew."

At a time when the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and other Catholic dioceses around the nation have been closing parishes that attract as many as several hundred worshippers a week, Protestant denominations are supporting congregations a

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Protestants resist urge to close churches

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fraction of that size. Although both Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations face falling attendance at worship, these different branches of the Christian family are taking radically different approaches to determining whether a congregation is viable, and who should decide what to do about a falling church.

Catholic dioceses, with power strongly concentrated in the hands of bishops and a theology that says only priests can celebrate Mass, are citing declining numbers of worshippers, dollars, and clergy in moving aggressively to consolidate churches. The Archdiocese of Boston has closed nearly one-quarter of its parishes over the past decade. But Protestant denominations, which often emphasize congregational independence and democratic decision-making, are leaving many of their small churches open, avoiding the controversy that has characterized the Catholic process but allowing for a sizable number of struggling, even moribund, congregations with minimal programming and part-time clergy.

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BISHOP MARGARET G. PAYNE

"We have some wonderful small congregations, but we also have some small congregations that are just really a bunch of folks hanging in there, sometimes with a lot of assets, and they're really not, to my mind, being a church the way they should be, but just clinging to the past," said Bishop Margaret G. Payne, who heads the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "But in our denomination, the membership has to have a vote if they want to close, and they're usually reluctant to do that. And I have no need or desire to make my life more difficult by going around trying to close churches."

The number of small congregations is rising — the United Methodist Church, for example, now has 40 congregations in Massa-

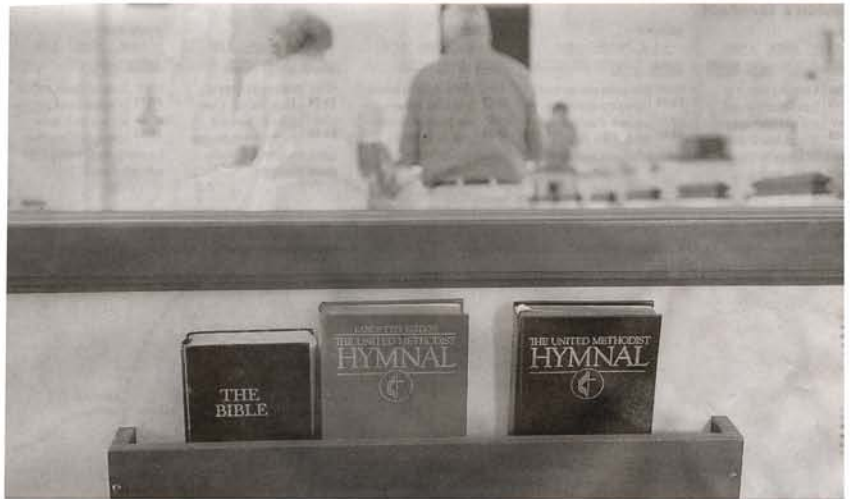
chusetts with fewer than 25 worshippers, up from 27 a decade ago, while the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches have some area congregations so small that they no longer meet at all. And the number of closings is also rising — the Episcopal Church, for example, merged three congregations in Fall River last month, and expects congregations in South Boston and Malden, among others, to decide to close soon.

Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ, are offering congregations tools to study their own viability and prospects for growth, but the pace of closings is slow because Protestant leaders rarely have the authority to unilaterally close churches, and no matter how small the congregation, the last few remaining worshippers rarely want to turn out the lights.

A new study by scholars at Duke University and the University of Arizona found that just 1 percent of religious congregations close every year — a much lower closure rate than in other types of organizations, including nonprofits. But the authors say this is not necessarily a sign of health; rather, they declare, "It seems more likely that this low rate indicates an organizational population whose weakest members continue to live on in a weakened state."

"If you do the minimal thing — run a worship service once a week and lock up for the rest of the week — they're not that expensive to run," Mark A. Chaves, a sociology professor at Duke and one of the authors of the study, said in an interview. "Some of them have very valuable property and big endowments and they can go on for decades with shockingly few people in the pews."

Chaves noted that smaller congregations, by their nature, can usually afford far less program-



JOHN BOHN/GLOBE STAFF

The First United Methodist Church in Spencer has also seen its enrollment decline. The church no longer has a choir. It lost its music director when the congregation ran out of funds to pay him. Recent services have drawn few people.

ming than larger congregations — meaning weaker music programs, fewer activities for young people, and less evangelization. And denominational leaders say many small congregations have given up on outreach — a fundamental element of Christian theology — because the members are either too old to launch programs or because they are happy with familiar faces.

"If there's a lot of energy, even if it's small, they can do a lot of things to change their situation," said Andrew Gustafson, an official of the United Church of Christ, the largest Protestant denomination in Massachusetts. The United Church of Christ has seen 39 of its 435 congregations in the state close over the last decade, and has 31 congregations with fewer than 25 people attending worship.

"If they're all in their 70s and 80s, and they don't have the programs to offer for young families to come in, then you're almost in a hospice situation, and every now and then you see that happen," Gustafson said. "It's sad, but it may just be time for the ministry to end."

A tour of the First United Methodist Church in Spencer, offered by volunteer custodian Joseph Gendron, 75, is a reminder of a more vibrant past. Gendron pointed out the pews where the choir sat when there was a choir; the organ that the music director played before the congregation

ran out of funds to pay him; the classrooms that used to house the religious education programs; and the kitchen once used for church suppers.

On a recent weekend, worship in the Spencer church drew nine people. Women gathered in the kitchen beforehand unwrapping kiddies, recalling healthier days.

"I feel like this is my church — my children were all baptized here," said Joyce Stone, 76, who has belonged to the church since 1959. "We're going to try to hang onto it for a while and see, hoping we can bring in some young people, with children. I have a lot of faith it will go on."

Stone fondly recalled church suppers the congregation had for fund-raisers, but said the advanced age of most worshippers has become a problem. "It's getting to the point where people can't be on their feet that long," she said.

Kieras, the part-time minister in Spencer, Southbridge, and as a chaplain at a nearby hospital, travels 14 miles each Sunday between the two small congregations in her blue Toyota Tacoma pickup truck, but she is giving up the churches this year, and it is not clear what will happen next. In Southbridge, oil costs are so high that, last winter, churchgoers worshiped in the basement, on folding chairs with carpet samples for cushioning, rather than paying to heat the sanctuary.

"There were days you had to come early to get a seat," said Phyllis Olszta, 73, who has worshipped at the Southbridge church for 40 years. "Still, we're praying and hoping that we'll get back to where we were."

Worshippers have different theories for why congregations become small, but many attribute the changes to societal shifts.

"It's a different world today," said Donald Nass, 87, a Southbridge worshiper and a World War II veteran who still wears a patch on his jacket from his Air Force division. "The young people have so much going on. Men and women are both working. And you've got television today. But we really believe in God, and we really believe coming to church is the thing to do."

Mainline Protestant churches in New England often benefit from, and are burdened by, historically significant but costly to maintain. Many of the white steepled churches in the region are now congregations of the United Church of Christ or the Unitarian Universalist Association, and some congregations spend the bulk of their resources maintaining their historic buildings.

Small Protestant congregations are taking a variety of approaches to survive. Many have endowments of more than \$1 million that finance their operations. Oth-

ers raise revenues by leasing steeples for cellphone relays, or basements for day-care centers. And others cut costs by employing a part-time minister.

The worshippers who stay at tiny congregations often say they view their churches as home and the other members as family.

In West Roxbury, where eight to 10 people attend Sunday worship at St. Stephen's United Methodist Church, congregants tend to spread themselves out among the pews because, the Rev. Linda Grenfall said, they think it makes the church look more crowded. In Salem, where the First Universalist Society draws 40 to 60 people to a sanctuary that seats 600, the minister has noted that people head to their favorite pews, except in winter, when they take seats that surround a heating grate.

"Every Sunday, I climb that 15-foot pulpit, because that is a tradition that is important for the congregation to maintain," said the minister, the Rev. Marjorie Matty who sees some signs of success as the congregation tries to rebuild.

"We have talked about meeting in smaller spaces, but I think having an optimistic view of abundance in a climate of scarcity is an important thing, so we meet in the sanctuary," she said. "It's an extravagance we enjoy."

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