



Singing pastor Ken Grambo: "...it's a small congregation now but it's growing and we're hoping it can still be a light on the hill." Photo by Dan Toulgoet

Dunbar church celebrates 60 with hope for future

By Naoibh O'Connor-Staff writer, Vancouver Courier, Sept 2004

When Alma Lawrence started attending Dunbar Evangelical Lutheran Church in the 1940s, all the pews, including those in the balcony, were filled with congregants. Even in the 1970s, families flocked to the quaint old building, which holds at least 150, on West 31st Avenue, a block east of Dunbar. Times have changed-for it and many other religious institutions in Vancouver-with Sunday service numbers falling to between 25 and 50.

But the 89-year-old is optimistic change will come. "It's sort of a trend we're going through. A lot of smaller churches have the same problem, but we're trying to increase our membership and we have somewhat," she said. Many members, she noted, were forced to move away from the city when housing became too expensive.

But the church still managed to reach its 60th anniversary, which was marked by celebrations last Sunday.

The special occasion was presided over by Pastor Ken Grambo, also known as the "singing pastor" for his musical gifts.

Grambo, too, sees interest in the church climbing since he became its minister three years ago. "I think in some ways there's a move back now. In my experience people say, 'We've

tried some other things and came up empty,' so they come back to the church where there always has and always will be ultimate meaning for living and for dying."

The Dunbar Lutheran congregation was formed by Scandinavian fishermen in 1944. They met in a vacant restaurant on Dunbar Street until the church building, an attractive white structure with stained glass window above the altar, was built in 1946. Charter members Chris and Asbjurg Moan were taking their baby for a walk when they spotted the parcel of land, which they thought would be an ideal building site.

"They felt a need for a Lutheran church here in the area," Grambo said. "And, actually, they chose a high point in the Dunbar area and dedicated it at the time to be a light on the hill. As a Christian church they wanted it to be a light on the hill, a place that attracted people and that could give people meaning and direction."

Dunbar Lutheran enjoyed its heyday in the 1970s, when membership was at its peak. The youth group was active and a choir sang out.

"They were alive in the sense of outreach and bringing others in. People were just telling their neighbours to come along and youth were finding company here," Grambo said. "The church seemed to be more needed in people's lives then because things were tougher."

In recent years, he says, material distractions and a desire for free time for recreation and other pursuits made organized religion a low priority for many.

"People tend to worship other things and they look to other things for meaning that are not valuable-but they go for them because they're more attractive," Grambo said. "People move away and lives change so it's a small congregation now but it's growing and we're hoping it can still be a light on the hill."

Lawrence-the oldest member of the original congregation-never lost her connection with the church. She joined Dunbar Lutheran after moving to Vancouver from Lethbridge, Alta. "It's very important to go and hear God's word being preached and taught," she said. "As far as I'm concerned it's a matter of life and death."

The church is located at 3491 West 31st.

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