
ZION UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST OF MEDINA



Building Christian Community on the Prairie

The signboard in front declares that the Zion United Church of Christ of Medina has been a "Building Christian Community Since 1903." The congregation is the oldest of the six churches that serve this rural farming and ranching community located just north of Interstate 94 in Central North Dakota.

At its centennial celebration four years ago, the congregation uplifted his German Congregational heritage, and used its theme of "Building Christian Community" both to look at its past and to frame its future. Featured in the United Church News as it spruced up for its centennial celebration, the congregation is continuing to look forward.

Since then, it has upgraded electrical systems and replaced windows in both the fellowship hall and sanctuary, and it has shingled the fellowship hall and parsonage. This summer it is replacing windows and further insulating its parsonage. But maintaining and upgrading its architecturally-unique sanctuary and facilities is only part of the story. As part of its centennial observance it established its Legacy Fund, a permanent endowment invested in the United Church Foundation which is expected to surpass the \$20,000 mark this year.

This fall it will engage in a strategic planning process to further look at its facilities and accessibility, strengthen its worship and community ministry, and expand its outreach. Recognizing that the future of the church is inextricably intertwined with the community, the congregation is working to become a center of civic activities and a leader in community development.

The church provides hospitality to a number of community organizations which meet regularly in its fellowship hall. (The hall, a stressed-concrete structure also serves as the community's storm shelter). In addition, because of its centralized location within the conference, it has become a frequent host to conference committees and activities.

Its members and its Pastor Karl Limvere have become involved in asset based community development, currently giving particular emphasis to natural resource tourism opportunities and sustainable agriculture.

The Chase Lake Foundation, which holds its monthly board meetings in the Zion UCC Fellowship Hall, has developed and published its first birding trail booklet, which guides birders in a loop north of Medina that includes the Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge and a variety of habitats. Chase Lake is the continent's largest rookery for the white pelican and the area is the home to a number of rare bird species.

Last spring the foundation with the cooperation of the city converted an unused storefront room of the Medina City Hall into the Chase Lake Visitors and Information Center. The center is a distribution point for the organization's birding trail booklets and other tourism and informational materials. By this summer, new signs advertising the visitors center will invite Interstate 94 travelers to stop and see what the Medina community has to offer.

Another non-profit organization known as FARRMS (Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Resources Management and Sustainability) also held its initial meetings at the Zion UCC Fellowship Hall, and included board members from the congregation. FARRMS is working to encourage farmers to transition from conventional to organic agriculture and to encourage communities to engage in sustainable development.

The Foundation was able to secure grants and financing to build a new office building in Medina, which houses both its offices and the International Certification Services (ICS), which is an employee-owned company that certifies organic farmers, processors and distributors throughout the world. ICS, which is now the largest private employer in the community, was originally organized as Farm Verified Organic by Fred Kirschenmann, who grew up within Zion UCC and was ordained there and still farms in the community, when not at his off-farm job at the Aldo Leopold Center at Iowa State.

This spring FARRMS hired its first staff and will begin offering "Farm Beginnings — Organic 101" classes this fall to assist producers over a three-year transition to organic production. FARRMS also offers its students scholarships and a transition loan program modeled after Heifer International's "Passing on the Gift" program. It holds a quarterly public forum on sustainability, and has a modern classroom for community and area meetings. Past gifts and current grants to the foundation for its programs over the next three years will total over \$500,000.

The congregation not only is a 5 for 5 UCC church, but also has a mission opportunity focus each month of the year to support programs selected by its mission committee. After one of its members, Deb Hoffmann, returned from the New Orleans UCC work week this spring, the congregation participated in a New Orleans luncheon that raised money for a month's rental of the conference pick up in New Orleans and bought building supply gift cards for the church that hosted the work week.

The church also provides leadership for the Medina-Streeter & Gackle ministerial associations which annually conduct a Lenten series together in five central prairie communities. The Medina ministerial will conduct its third annual Gospel In the Park event September 16 as part of Medina's Fall Festival. Pastor Karl also is deeply involved in rural life issues and ministry both within the UCC and the North Dakota Conference of Churches.

The church has an active Women's Fellowship, and a Quilter's Fellowship, both of which extend their outreach into the community and beyond. It holds a Monday morning Community Bible Study that will soon be ten years old. The invitation is to bring your favorite translation or Bible study and come and share with each other in reading the Bible. The congregation also recently completed one of its periodic adult Bible studies, a twelve part series based on the Heart of Christianity by Marcus Borg.

Building community, especially building Christian community, is an ongoing task, particularly in a rural community. Pastor Karl keeps saying the job of the church is to rebuild community and society until the kingdom of God arrives. The congregation keeps asking "Are we there, yet?" but yet keeps moving forward in its journey of faith.