

Small Union Church Among Last Of Its Kind

By ANN PAVKOVIC
Staff Writer

INDIANTOWN GAP — Few people would probably notice that the congregation at Salem Walmer's Church uses some practices from the United Church of Christ and some from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

For instance, services include the Lutheran version of the Lord's prayer and the UCC version of the Apostle's Creed, or statement of faith. The hymn books are UCC but the Sunday school books are Lutheran.

The church, on Coulter Road, is the last "union church" in Lebanon County. A union church is a church shared by two denominations.

Union churches were popular in the 18th and early 19th centuries when it wasn't practical for two denominations to build and maintain their own facilities. Few are left today.

The Rev. Arthur Yeagy, who has served the church since 1978, serves members of both denominations and incorporates the practices of both.

Until 25 years ago, pastors from each denomination served on alternate Sundays, but that practice was abandoned at Walmer's, partly because of a shortage of ministers in both denominations. The shortage of interim or part-time pastors, like Yeagy, is so critical that he sometimes officiates at services at a nearby UCC church, although he is a



The Rev. Arthur Yeagy

retired Lutheran minister.

Yeagy, who is 77, considered "pulling away" last year but was worried that services might have to be cut until a replacement could be found for him. "There is no guarantee they would find someone right away," he explained, and so he continues to commute from

Harrisburg.

Both denominations work to keep things fair and equal at Walmer's church, Yeagy said.

An example of those efforts can be seen in the weekly church bulletin. Above the order of worship, the denominations are listed. The order alternates, with UCC listed first one Sunday and Lutheran listed first the next.

But members still "identify to a considerable extent with their denomination," Yeagy said. Members support the retirement homes and world hunger programs of their individual denominations, he said.

When the first Walmer's Church was built in 1750 by Peter Walmer, members of its congregation lived close by. Today, the property is surrounded by Fort Indiantown Gap military reservation and "the house the church owns across the street where the caretaker lives is the only house within walking distance," Yeagy said. Most of the congregation must drive miles to attend church, now.

Because of the church's location, Yeagy said, "I think the church members understand that there is not room for growth. Membership is static." He said there have been about six baptisms at Walmer's since he came there 11 years ago.

Attendance at Sunday services has dropped in recent years to an average of 45 or 50 people. The

church has about 90 members.

In spite of the changes, the members remain active. They are loyal to the church because of family connections, Yeagy said.

The building itself, built in 1850, inspires a sense of commitment in members whose ancestors worshiped there, he said.

Displayed in a glass cabinet in the front of the church are some sacramental vessels used in the church during the 1800s. A few more pieces that date back to the early 1800s have been locked away because of their value.

Most of the union churches in America were located in Southeastern and Central Pennsylvania and Northern Maryland. The union church concept was brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans, according to "One Body We: A History of The Central Pennsylvania Synod," by Harold A. Dunkelberger.

Most union congregations disbanded by the end of the 19th century. By the 1930s, "neither denomination ... favored the union church," with a main objection that the loyalty of the congregation was too localized. Local bodies of the denominations were asked to work toward dissolving them.

By 1968, there were only 49 union churches left, with 23 of them considering separation or consolidation, according to "One Body We." There are even fewer today.