Nancy Pearson stayed home from church on the Sundays her face was swollen and rife with bruises.

Ordinarily, she would be beside her husband, Duane, teaching Sunday school. Then they'd worship together with their two young boys in a pew near the front of the sanctuary.

As devout Christians, the Pearsons' lives revolved around their church. Still, Duane's faith wasn't enough to keep him from beating his wife.

"I knew it was wrong, but I didn't know how not to do it," he said.

The Pearsons' story reveals a side of domestic violence seldom told. It shatters a common myth among people of faith that this problem only affects non-believers.

They and others are revealing their stories here to raise awareness about believers involved in family violence. Likewise, clergy, counselors and shelter workers share the unique dilemmas they face in aiding the devout.

The obstacles are immense.

Families fear being shunned by their faith communities. Clergy worry courts won't respect the sanctity of marriage. And shelters agonize religions will treat domestic violence only as a marriage crisis, not a safety issue.

"Domestic violence brings up huge trust issues for churches and outside agencies," said the Rev. David Ogren of Cloquet, who counseled the Pearsons. "But the day is past when churches can say this doesn't touch us."

**Breaking ground**

A decade ago, domestic violence was still a taboo topic in society. Today, between movies about marital violence and real-life drama featuring football legend O.J. Simpson, the subject has pierced the public's conscience.

And now it's slowly hitting home in churches, temples and mosques.

"There's been a tremendous change, and churches are giving permission to talk about this," said the Rev. John Hammack, a police chaplain who responds to domestic violence calls. "But it's not everybody. You still find clergy who will tell a battered woman to go home and be a good wife."

Religious women often are the most reluctant to report family violence. In many faiths, women are taught to obey their husbands, and self-sacrifice is exalted as virtuous. Men are esteemed as heads of households.

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*By Susan Hogan/Albach*

*News-Tribune staff writer*

Jan. 29, 1995
“Some men will say a marriage license is their right to do what they want and a marriage, but that is not what is intended by the church,” said Bob Brenning, who teaches religious studies at the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth.

The numbers are still small, but more clergy than ever before are referring women to shelters and abusive men to treatment programs. Likewise, faith communities are seeking ways to reassure victims and confront abusers, without alienating either.

“Women especially need to hear from their spiritual leaders they don’t deserve to be beaten,” said Sheri Standing Bear, a Duluth shelter worker who leads forums on domestic violence in churches.

“Domestic violence is not God’s will — it’s breaking the law,” she said. “There’s a big difference between a godly man and a man who thinks he’s God.”

**Breaking point**

Duane and Nancy Pearsons’ moment of truth came two years ago on New Year’s Eve. That’s the day Duane was arrested after Nancy reported his violent behavior to police.

When officers arrived at their rural home in Holyoke Township, Duane was outside splitting wood. They found Nancy inside, shuddering with fear, her body bruised black and blue, her lips smeared with blood.

A few days earlier, after going to a Christmas program together, Duane had thrown Nancy into the snow and repeatedly stomped on her legs. Now the tall 250-pounder was threatening to kill her.

“It wasn’t until Nancy was strong enough to have me locked up that I finally realized that I was out of control,” said Duane, 48. “That night, when my pastor visited me in jail, I was reborn.”

Nancy turned to police only after enduring years of Duane’s violent episodes. During her 23 years of marriage, she had confided in three pastors who advised, “The family that prays together, stays together.”

None ever referred her to a safe house or shelter.

“I thought it was my fault and that I was a failure as a wife and a Christian because I was being beaten,” said Nancy, 44. “I prayed harder and tried all the more to please my husband, but his violence got worse.”

At Cloquet Gospel Tabernacle, Nancy found an understanding ear in Pastor Ogren. When she took refuge in a shelter and had her husband arrested, the pastor continued to call and offer support.

Duane, too, received care and straight feedback about his behavior. Ogren accompanied him from the jail house to the courthouse and assisted him in getting help.

“It’s a difficult situation for pastors, because she’s in physical danger and he’s in huge denial,” Ogren said. “But when people are desperate and reaching out to their shepherd, and when you see violence happening, you can’t stand back and not get involved.”

**Turning point**

Pastor Ogren believes Duane’s arrest was a turning point for him. The help Nancy found in a shelter also put her on a path to healing.

But some religious groups are wary of these approaches. They object to believers ever involving police or courts and suspect “secular” women’s shelters and men’s groups break apart marriages. Instead, their remedy to violence is marriage counseling.

“I feel God wants to harmonize a home, not divide a home,” said the Rev. Tobe Bolles, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Pengilly. “The world’s approach has been too quick to get them out of there — split the whole thing up.”

Domestic violence advocates say marriage counseling often makes a battered woman’s situation more dangerous if she speaks out. They urge faith communities to get women and children to a safe home or shelter.

“Safety has to come first,” said Beth Anderson, director of Rural Women’s Advocates in Cloquet. “Until the man’s abusive behavior is addressed, marriage counseling is premature.”

Advocates also say blaming the breakup of marriages on women who report violent partners or the agencies that serve them divert responsibility from where it belongs.

“It’s the violence and the men who batter who are breaking up families,” said Mary Ness, a Christian who works in a Duluth women’s shelter. “Some congregations don’t face that. Many times men are the major financial contributors. It’s easier to blame women than to confront a prominent member with this kind of problem.”

Ness said women who stay at shelters interact with people who have a range of beliefs. The Women’s Coalition where she works isn’t a religious organization but strives to be a safe place for women of all religions.

“We have lots of women who stay here who go to church every Sunday,” she said. “We have Native American women who burn tobacco. We also have arrangements with the synagogue to use their kitchen in case we have Jewish women who keep kosher.”

Ogren doesn’t fully embrace the philosophies of agencies outside the church either. But he says they are the only option until faith communities create their own shelters and recovery programs.

“When there’s proof of extreme physical violence, jail is probably the best alternative,” he said. “Until Christians get their act together, we have to rely on the expertise of others to help us deal with this.”

**Breaking denial**

Month after month, John L’Heureux knelt in a confessional box and whispered to a Roman Catholic priest that he was striking his wife. The priest repeatedly “absolved” him of his sin, without suggesting he get help.

Few men who batter ever get help on their own. Without intervention, violence usually escalates. That’s why the guidance of their faith communities can be critical, said Ty Schroyer, coordinator of the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth.
Keeping the faith

L'Heureux is still active in his church, but he has separated from his wife of 48 years. His faith has helped him confront his violence, but he wishes his church was more involved in his recovery.

“I've never heard a priest talk about domestic violence,” he said. “I know there must be others at church who are battling the same problem, but you never hear of it. It's just not something you talk about there.”

L'Heureux believes many clergy are unaware of the complexities of domestic violence. He says their lack of training and the silence of faith communities on this issue are two of the biggest hurdles to overcome.

“When I preach on domestic violence, it’s not unusual for someone to come to me afterward and say, ‘I want to talk about this experience,'” said the Rev. Larry Johnson, pastor of Family of God Lutheran Church in Duluth. “Clergy can send powerful messages to congregations about this issue. If they create a safe atmosphere, people will open up.”

After a newspaper reported her husband was in jail, Gloria Haugen’s priest stopped her after Sunday worship and asked why. She was too ashamed and afraid to reply in the crowded church.

“I shied away from my church after that,” said Haugen, 33, who divorced her violent husband after five years of marriage. “If he had called me or visited me or asked me to stop by his office, I would have opened up. But he never brought it up again.”

Haugen also was confused by her church's restrictions on divorced people receiving sacraments. She felt alienated by the image of Christian families her priest spoke of from the pulpit.

“I didn’t fit in anymore and I wasn’t being ministered to there,” said Haugen, who has found another church, where members are up front about their struggles.

New beginnings

Duane Pearson no longer teaches Sunday school but remains active in his Cloquet church. He believes God has restored him with the help of counseling.

Nancy Pearson still lives in fear of her husband. She stopped going to her church and resettled in Duluth with her young children because of her safety concerns.

Her plight is not uncommon. Victims, especially, sometimes feel forced to leave their church home because of shame, lack of acceptance or fears of encountering their abuser.

“It’s sad because their spiritual life is cut short when that happens,” said Yvonne Aronson, director of New Day Shelter in Ashland. “This is the time when they most need their church.”

With his pastor’s encouragement, Duane has begun to share his tale with other church members. It’s a story of a boy who grew up to be a batterer like his father.

“I was teaching my sons the wrong lessons, just as my father taught me,” Duane said. “I believe the Lord has healed me and is asking me to be truthful about my behavior to help other men.”

For Nancy, the scars aren’t so easily healed. She’s skeptical of Duane’s claims of a divine healing. Although she’s without a church home, her faith remains strong.

“I can’t put into words what it’s like to go through this abuse and almost die,” she said. “I don’t go out much. I have deadbolt locks on the doors. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to trust again. I’ve lost a great deal, but God has never abandoned me.”

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Susan Hogan/Albach
Duluth News-Tribune
Jan. 29, 1995
Cornell Award
Susan Hogan/Albach
The State
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Note: My entries for this award include 1995 clips from The State and the Duluth News-Tribune. I was employed at the News-Tribune for eight months last year before transferring to The State. Both newspapers fall within the circulation range for this award category.
It's something to behold, that glittering mass of chrome packed so tightly into the parking lot there's barely room to maneuver.

The cars arrive early and leave late, like those of football fans at a bowl game or Christmas shoppers at the mall.

But this isn't one of those places. It's a church, that historic institution pollsters insist is losing its mass appeal.

Not here. Not on this busy perch nestled by woods at the corner of Glenwood Street and Jean Duluth Road, near the Morley Heights neighborhood.

At Lakeview Covenant Church, so many worshipers come on Sunday mornings they can't all fit into the sanctuary, even with metal folding chairs supplementing rows of padded pews.

Some spill into the narthex, behind glass windows where they listen intently to the Rev. Don Peres' passionate preaching over a loudspeaker.

Pastor Don, as they call him, speaks about sin and grace in high-pitched crescendos with the drama and emotion of a Greek tragedy. From a dark-stained pulpit that commands center stage, his cheeks redden as he crusades against the evils in society.

"It's got to stop!" he shouts, waving an index finger at the crowd. "We are the only ones — God's people, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb — we're the only ones who can turn it around."

Among those in the well-dressed crowd are some of Duluth's most prominent professionals — doctors, business leaders, the mayor. Many sit with well-worn Bibles open on their laps next to daughters in ruffled dresses and sons groomed in crisp Oxford shirts and colorful ties.

Lakeview is likely the city's fastest growing congregation, with numbers edging to 700 on Sundays. It's almost four times the size it was eight years ago, already outgrowing a $1.3 million building expansion completed in 1993.

But it's not the kind of congregation the gurus of church growth say is supposed to appeal to modern senses. Its services aren't flashy and it doesn't buy into the trends being touted as the way for churches to thrive, such as downplaying doctrine or making worship more entertaining.

This is strictly a Bible church with a down-home, albeit conservative, evangelical message about Christian living. Here, there's no soft-pedaling. Pastor Don hits between the eyes with Scripture and clear-cut views about right and wrong.

"We get fed God's word here," said Cynthia Lovold, 30, of Two Harbors. "Pastor Don isn't afraid to speak the truth. He'll call a sin a sin and won't water anything down."

Melting pot

The people who come to Lakeview are a melting pot of religious traditions. They're former Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians and almost any denomination you can name.

They span a gamut of generations, some who left churches they'd attended most of their lives to be here. What they discovered was a community of believers that works hard at being Christian, people who study the Bible, pray together and try to make a difference in the world.

"I don't know of another church that's this alive," said Dr. Craig Gilbertson, a family physician and a former Lutheran whose family joined the church last summer. "People are really involved. There's a lot of enthusiasm for the Christian lifestyle. You feel that here."

National surveys show that at least 40 percent of Americans say they attend church regularly. But most of the nation's largest denominations have plateaued or are losing members, according to a recent study by the National Council of Churches.

What many Christians across the country say they want is what members of Lakeview say they are getting — biblical teaching that touches them at their deepest core, a close-knit
circle of friends to share their spirituality and hands-on guidance about living their faith.

"People who have strong convictions about biblical authority and who want to know about the Bible are seeking out these churches," said Herb Miller, a church consultant and director of the Net Results Resource Center in Lubbock, Texas. "It's not for everybody, but this approach is being used more and more with growing success."

To nurture faith, Lakeview offers 18 different Bible study and prayer groups targeting youths to seniors. In addition, there's a prayer chain and several members have prayer partners. The church also distributes a weekly prayer list that sometimes identifies as many as 500 needs, from world missions to the names of members battling diseases like cancer.

"Nobody is too old or too young or too important or unimportant in this church," said Nancy Davidson, 82, who has been coming for six years. "People really look after one another. They really walk in the Lord's Word."

The main event

Although some churches have gone casual, Sunday worship at Lakeview is still a dress-up affair: Even little girls carry purses with matching gloves and hats.

Inside the sanctuary, strains of organ music fill the air. As the morning wears on, there's music to suit almost everybody's taste, including old-time Gospel, traditional hymns and pop-style choruses. When the congregation isn't singing, one of the church's many choirs, ensemble groups or trios is likely performing.

"There are so many people involved here, people really share their talents," said Tamara Felix, 35, who's been at Lakeview for six years. "You feel such camaraderie and support when you're with people who have the same spirituality and faith."

With his striking white hair and perpetual smile, Pastor Don looks like the friendly face on Quaker Oatmeal boxes as he steps into the pulpit. The room quiets as worshipers reach for Bibles and settle in for a sermon that will easily last 35 minutes.

It's that sermon, and Pastor Don's dynamic flair for delivery, that keeps some coming from as far away as Silver Bay and Island Lake. A seasoned traveling evangelist, the pastor is deft at spinning inspirational stories about inner transformation.

"When you hear his messages, they are always what you need," said Kenneth Laurion, 70, who's been at Lakeside for three years. "I'm the kind of guy who needs a lot of messages."

As born-again Christians, believers here say a personal relationship with Jesus is key to eternal salvation and leads to righteous living. They insist those who follow this path can be assured of being saved, though in this life they are sinners doing battle with Satan.

They look to Pastor Don to steer them on the path of goodness with his expository-style preaching, a method in which he dissects the Bible verse by verse. Citing Scripture as his authority, he preaches boldly against "sins" such as lying, anger and, more controversially, divorce.

"I'm very much against divorce, but our doors are open to divorced people," he explained after a service. "They know we love them, even though I may say from the pulpit divorce is wrong. We're not coming down on people about what happened in their past, but we're saying to people in the present, don't get divorced."

Sunday services are at 8:15 and 11 a.m. In between, every nook and cranny of the three-level building is bustling with Sunday school classes, including six different options for adults. There are so many classes that a college group meets in a nearby home because there isn't room in the church.

To create more space, members have suggested buying a house or opening a balcony. A third worship service is likely to be added on Saturdays in the fall.

"Growth is a nice problem for a church to have," said Jim Broman, church chairman. "We definitely have growing pains because it has all happened so fast. The Lord has blessed us and we want to keep growing. We be-
Growing pains

This isn't the first time Lakeview has had a "problem" with growth. The church moved to eastern Duluth in 1970 after outgrowing its original home in central Duluth.

At the time, Jean Duluth Road was a mass of open land and countryside. Now the reddish-brown-brick church stands on one of the city's most well-traveled corners.

Although Pastor Don is quick to deflect credit, Lakeview isn't the same church today as it was when he came to town nearly eight years ago. Back then the church was ripe with conflict, with members stewing over their previous pastor, who had been asked to leave.

Pastor Don arrived with a long history of taking dying or stagnant churches and turning them into vibrant ministry centers. A Kansas native, he was a Southern Baptist minister for 12 years before joining the Covenant denomination 22 years ago.

"Christians are hungering to get into the Bible," said Pastor Don, 55, explaining the reason for his success. "They want to be fed and challenged. They will not stay in the same spot spiritually. I also push people to reach beyond themselves, so we don't just live for ourselves."

One of the biggest turnarounds has been youth programs, which have grown from eight to 175 youths at the junior and senior high levels alone. That's larger than entire congregations in many churches.

In addition, a Wednesday program called Pioneer Club draws 200 young children. The clubs are something of a Lutheran version of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. But besides earning badges for crafts, hobbies and outdoor skills, children are rewarded for memorizing Bible verses and displaying good manners.

"The badges are neat," said an enthusiastic Ruth Knezevich, 8, as she showed off a blue sash covered with red-and-white square badges depicting gifts.

Besides Pastor Don, Lakeview has a full-time youth pastor and a visitation director as well as several part-time staff and volunteers. It's considering adding a counselor who also would help new Christians develop their faith.

As visitation director, Diann Nordstrom is the only woman on the church's ministry staff. Women aren't allowed to serve on the board of elders or be pastors. They do play key roles on other committees and in the ministry here. Pastor Don also teaches that the Bible stipulates men as heads of households.

"For us, it's not negative, it gives us order," Nordstrom said. "Women submit to their husbands, assuming that the husbands submit to Christ. Even though it's a submissive relationship that's encouraged, it doesn't mean God calls us to be doormats."

Before he became a Christian at age 18, Pastor Don was a heavy drinker with little use for school. At one point, he felt so distraught about his life he said he tried to commit suicide by driving into a tree.

"I berated into that tree with my eyes closed," he said, curling his knuckles as though they were wrapped around a steering wheel. "For so long, I didn't work. I believe angels picked up my car and brought me to town. God obviously had other plans for me. And if God can transform me, I believe wholeheartedly that he can transform anybody."

Reaching out

If the Bible and prayer are Lakeview's foundation, then caring and outreach are the cornerstones. The church gives more than one-third of its roughly $500,000 annual budget to missions.

In addition, members volunteer to help the needy at the Union Gospel Mission or visit the elderly in nursing homes. A group of teen-agers recently returned from Mexico, where they painted houses and worked among the poor, an experience the church hopes might inspire some to become missionaries.

"This trip, like, totally changed my life," Jon Fashbaugh, 15, said with emotion to the congregation at a special Wednesday service after returning from Mexico. "I was really a watered-down Christian before. Now, I just want to give myself, like, totally to the Lord."

The caring is shown in little ways, too. On Sunday mornings, stacks of cards are left on a table for members to sign. They are mailed to those celebrating the birth of a new baby or, perhaps, marking the death of a loved one. Once a month, the pastor's family hosts a party for those celebrating birthdays.

"It's very encouraging to see your church be the place so many people want to worship the Lord," said Floyd Eklund, 77, who joined Lakeview when it was founded in 1938. "But we don't want people to feel like they're in the crowd. We're a family and we're doing everything we can to keep things personal."

That personal touch and a willingness to reach beyond themselves is how Lakeview puts faith into action. Sometimes the caring has made a dramatic difference in people's lives.

Kelly Hanson's family had been attending Lakeview only two months before being touched by the church's ministry. Pregnant with her fifth child, Hanson's doctor ordered her to remain bedridden for almost five months last year after she went into labor prematurely.

Within an hour after her birth, church members stepped in to help. They provided meals for Hanson's family for the duration of her pregnancy, took care of her four young children while her husband was at work and even cleaned her house.

"They literally took care of our family until my daughter was born," said Hanson, 34, who gave birth to another four months ago. "This love we felt from the people was overwhelming. I don't know what we would have done without them."

When Marge McGreevy's teen-ager was killed in a car accident, the church rallied behind her family, too, even though they weren't members. McGreevy had met Pastor Don at the Lester Park Jubilee store, where she works as a cashier and he sometimes shops for groceries. She didn't go to church then and used to tease that she was saving a seat for her in the front pew.

When her daughter died, she was the first person she called. Two months later, when her teen-ager son killed himself out of despair over his sister's death, the church was there again.

"They showered us with cards and the ladies brought in food and put on a wonderful luncheon," said McGreevy, 47, who now attends Lakeview with her husband, Dick. "They were so caring and giving. They didn't even know us, but were there for us through the hardest times of our lives.

"I've never met a church quite like this."
On a chilly winter's night, a Buddhist, Jew, Christian, Unitarian and Sufi slip quietly into an old stone Duluth church.

Inside are a dozen others, in their stocking feet. Some embrace traditional religions. Some walk a more eclectic spiritual path.

Most are strangers to one another. A furniture maker from Silverdale. A teacher from Ely. A grocer from Cloquet.

Despite differences, on this night they come together in search of common ground. And they find it, not by debating the tenets of world religions.

Instead, they dance.

Using folk steps, they glide and twirl in circle dances. As they move, they chant sacred phrases from the world's spiritual traditions in Arabic, Sanskrit and other languages.

"Dances of Universal Peace," as the practice is called, is a growing interfaith phenomenon. Some 200 groups across North America meet regularly to dance, including two in the Twin Cities.

In the Northland, people from different spiritual backgrounds have been coming together for roughly a year. They dance once a month, either in Duluth or on the Iron Range.

The dances aren't performances or entertainment, but a physical form of meditation or prayer involving the whole body.

The steps are simple and designed for people without dance backgrounds.

"It's easy to do and it makes you feel very peaceful, very loving and non-judgmental," said Linda Dahl, 56, of Cloquet, who has danced twice. "It creates unity in a way that words alone can't."

Inward journey

The dances are becoming popular at a time when more Americans are looking inward instead of to their temples and churches for intimate spiritual experiences.

Instead of embracing dogmas, many are opting for a self-styled spirituality. Even those in mainline religions are turning to yoga, drumming and spiritual customs from Eastern and American Indian traditions as supplements.

"With the dances, I am being moved from my soul and spirit rather than being directed by my mind," said Kathleen DeVereaux, 43, of Duluth, who has danced three times. "I am more actively involved in worship than just sitting in a church and listening to a preacher."

The dances are promoted as a path to mysticism, a form of spiritual ecstasy that comes from an unmediated experience of God. The modern fascination with mysticism is evident in the new popularity of

writings by medieval Christian mystics and musical tapes featuring Gregorian Chant, such as the recent blockbuster recording by the Benedictine monks of Santa Domingo de Silos.

"Temples, churches and mosques are meant to be profound places of spiritual experiences and sometimes they're not," said John "Hakim" Bushnell of Minneapolis, who leads the Northland dances. "The dances are reliably those things. Ironically, historic religion was the repository for mysticism in previous times."

The dances began in San Francisco in 1986. They originated with Samuel Lewis, a Sufi teacher and Zen master who studied the mystical traditions of Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity.

Lewis, who died in 1971, was influenced by his teachers, American dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis and Hazrat Inayat Khan, a native of India who argued for universal Sufism over its strict understanding as Islamic mysticism.

"The dances are for everybody," said Lesley "Nur Latifa" Pownall, 33, of Duluth, who helps organize the dances. "They convey a universal message of peace. Within all traditions, there is one truth, the same source, God."

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Susan Hogan/Albach
Duluth News-Tribune
February 26, 1995
Sacred steps

The dancing begins slowly, with 17 people walking in a large circle without their shoes. The room is quiet except for the sound of wool socks brushing across the carpeted floor.

"Try to feel each step as a new event," instructs Bushnell, a bearded man with shaggy hair. "Bring your attention to your breath going in and out of your nostrils."

The exercise helps those in the group become more aware of their bodies. When the walking stops, Bushnell straps on a guitar and teaches them a Buddhist chant about compassion and mercy.

As he gently strums, the group follows his lead and repeats the phrase "kwan zeon bosi" several times. As they chant, they bring their hands together above their heads and down to their hearts. A drum beats softly in the background.

"It's a fairly juicy experience," said Earl Rosenwinkel, 58, a Christian who frequents the dances. "It feeds my body and my spirit."

For Jenny Munoz, a first time dancer, the foreign words and movement are awkward initially. But by evening's end, the baby boomer mom beams as she floats around the room consumed by the spiritual language of dance.

"I didn't know what to expect, but it's very powerful," said Munoz, 37, of Duluth, who's carving her own spiritual path. "I felt both very peaceful and very energized, almost like I was vibrating inside. It's very spiritual."

Over the course of two hours, the group weaves through seven different dances, each lasting about 20 minutes.

"People approach this in different ways," said Andrea Gelb, a dance organizer from Virginia, Minn. "For some, it's a meditation. For others, it's a prayer."

The future

The dances evoke such inner peace for some that they are now being used across the country in schools, therapy groups, prisons, hospice houses, retirement villages and ecumenical worship celebrations.

But not anybody can teach them. Bushnell, for instance, spent two years studying under a mentor in Los Angeles before receiving his certification.

An interfaith center based in Seattle oversees the training of teachers and the growth of the dances worldwide. Founded in 1983, it's called the Peaceworks International Center for the Dances of Universal Peace.

The center also promotes dance camps around the world, including a weekend summer experience in Frontenac, Minn., 15 miles south of Red Wing.

"The dances are a way for people to meet each other in a safe space that honors each person and their religious beliefs," said Zamya Kirk, director of the Seattle center.

Bushnell hopes that eventually the Northland will have its own teachers to lead the dances. The two women who organize the dances here are now practicing toward that purpose.

"As you're touched by the dances you find that it's something you want to share with others," said Powall, a Duluth teacher learning to lead the dances. "For me, it's the full involvement of the body, the singing and the breathing as an expression of prayer."

Susan Hogan/Albach
Duluth News-Tribune
February 26, 1995
By Susan Hogan/Albach
News-Tribune staff writer

The most enduring symbol of the Christian faith is disappearing from some churches across the country.

The cross, a symbol of Jesus' crucifixion, is no longer being displayed in some evangelical churches in an attempt to attract worshipers turned off by traditional religion.

In mainline circles, too, the cross is being downplayed by some feminists, African-Americans and other minorities who say it glorifies violence. Instead of an image of Jesus' death, they prefer symbols that illustrate his ministry, such as loaves and fishes.

"It (the cross) feeds a death worship," said Catherine Keller, a feminist theologian at Drew University Theological School in Madison, N.J. "Nobody would want an electric chair or noose as a key symbol of faith, but that's what we would be using if Jesus were put to death by the state today."

The cross has been a universal symbol of Christianity since the Middle Ages. The image dates back to the early church, but it wasn't as prominent as the dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, according to Cyril Focknee, author of "The Cross and Crucifix."

"It's unbelievable to me that a Christian church would not display a cross," said the Rev. Seamus Walsh, pastor of Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Cloquet. "The cross tells the deepest truth of our faith, that death isn't the end of everything, but that Jesus' death is the beginning of everything (salvation)."

Conservative Christians insist the cross doesn't lose its significance, even if it's less conspicuous. The symbol's diminished prominence reflects some churches' efforts to create neutral worship environments that appeal to the unchurched.

The trend's most visible success is Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago, which draws 15,000 worshipers weekly. The church neither looks nor feels like a traditional church, with its glass building, 5,000-seat auditorium and the slick, theater-like worship void of traditional fixtures, such as hymns, pews and crosses.

"The cross has meaning for those who are people of faith," said the Rev. Fred Lund, pastor of Eastridge Community Church in Duluth. "But if you are exploring faith, that symbol doesn't have a meaning for you."

Lund's congregation has begun discussing what faith symbols, if any, it wants in a new church being planned. Two years ago, the church dropped the word "Baptist" from its name because it was considered a barrier to drawing visitors.

Crosses traditionally are visi-
ble atop church steeples and in
sanctuaries. Catholics often use
crucifixes — crosses bearing the
figure of Jesus — to accent the
sacred depth of God’s love.
Protestants exhibit stark crosses
without Jesus to emphasize his
resurrection.

But some critics charge that
the symbols convey a frightening
message that violence is both
good and redemptive. They argue
traditional teachings wrongly
make eternal salvation hinge
upon Jesus’ murder.

“We are taught ‘Jesus died for
our sins,’” said Delores Williams,
an African-American theologian
from Union Theological Seminary
in New York. “But that describes
redemption in terms that give sa-
cred validation to violence.”

Williams said the redemptive
value of Jesus is not in the way
he died, but in the life he lived.
Unfortunately, she said, the pri-
mary symbols of Christianity
center around romanticized
myths about his birth and death,
not his ministry.

“We need to look at the vio-
ence that our symbols of religion
support,” she said. “Instead of
Jesus’ death, we should be talking
about what he lived for — mercy,
justice, healing and spiritual
transformation.”

The Rev. Robert Coppock said
the cross doesn’t promote vio-
ence, but demonstrates that God
accomplished good out of the
evilness that led to Jesus’ death.

“The cross is about salvation,
the forgiveness of sin and hope
for eternal life,” said Coppock,
pastor of First Presbyterian
Church in Duluth. “To do away
with the cross would change the
whole meaning of Christianity.”

Bryan Anderson, a Lutheran,
has crosses displayed in his home.
They’re a reminder to him of the
cost of discipleship.

“It’s the most comprehensive
symbol of the Christian faith I
can think of,” said Anderson,
who is active in Violence Free
Duluth, a grass-roots community
organization.

John Heid, a Duluth peace ac-
tivist, said the cross is a glaring
reminder that Jesus was put to
death because of the revolution-
ary way he lived. Christians who
embrace Jesus’ radical message,
also may suffer for their convic-
tions.

“Some use the cross as a pri-
ivate symbol of personal tribula-
tions that makes the cross your
disease, your color or your gen-
der,” Heid said. “That misunder-
stands our calling to live like
Jesus, who reached out to those
people who were hungry, vulner-
able or outcast.”

Instead of doing away with
the cross, some Christians are
embracing new versions of the
image. A popular alternative is
the brightly colored Salvadoran
talk cross, which features sym-
ols of life, such as doves, trees
and children.

“These crosses don’t glorify
death and suffering,” said theolo-
gian Keller.

The notion of sacrificial love,
as represented by the cross, has
sometimes been misused to op-
press women and minorities, Kel-
ler said. Slaves, for instance,
were told by their white masters
that their suffering was virtuous
because it mirrored that of Jesus
on the cross. Likewise, women in
violent marriages have some-
times been told to endure their
suffering.

"God doesn't save us because
we suffer," Keller said. "The
thinking that we are redeemed by
blood is pervasive and hard to
change. The trouble is that it
numbs us to violence."

Some groups, such as Jeho-
vah's Witnesses, have never dis-
played crosses. Witnesses believe
Jesus died on a stake or tree, not
a cross. They also assert the cross
was originally a pre-Christian
symbol and, therefore, rooted in a
false religion.

"We don't venerate an object
that Jesus was supposedly put to
death with," said Claude Wood-
ward, presiding overseer of the
Cloquet branch. "If somebody
you knew got murdered with a
gun, would you wear a gun
around your neck?"

No crosses are displayed dur-
ing worship at Vineyard Chris-
tian Fellowship in Duluth. The
church doesn't object to them, but
it doesn't emphasize them either.

"For some people, crosses are
very, very meaningful, but other
people have an aversion to them," said Gerry Cheney, a pastoral
 counselor at the church. "People
who come from orthodox back-
grounds tend to like them. But
they aren't as significant to
newly converted Christians."

Sister Kathie McLaughlin said
that some Christians who want to
do away with the cross may be
seeming security and comfort
from their religion.

"A lot of people today are
looking for religion to make them
feel better," said McLaughlin, a
theologian at the College of St.
Scholastica. "Neither Christianity
nor the cross is about comfort.
It's about the transformation of
the world."
Meira Warshauer likens taking a mikvah — a Jewish ritual bath — to stepping into the womb of God.

Once a month, she and a few other Columbia women drive to Charleston, Charlotte or Augusta to immerse themselves in a small natural pool. The ancient rite is undertaken after menstruation for spiritual purity.

Because of the mikvah’s significance, the women are quietly lobbying for a bathhouse here. But they’re meeting some resistance from Jews who don’t observe the ritual.

The tension, in part, reflects a gap between older Jews who believe the ritual is based on dated ideas about women and sexuality, and younger generations who embrace it as a positive, even feminist, expression of their spirituality.

“The women of my mother’s generation had an aversion to mikvah — they didn’t think women were unclean, so they didn’t need to be purified,” said Warshauer, 46, a member of Beth Shalom, a Conservative synagogue. “But I don’t see it that way. It’s at the core of my spirituality.”

Mikvah is at the heart of family life for some Jewish couples, whose sexual habits depend on women’s ritual cleansing after menstruation. Couples — men and women — undergo mikvahs as converts or before holidays and sabbaths. Even dishes are sometimes immersed to make them ready for Jewish use.

Before a mikvah, Warshauer scrubs herself clean to the point of no makeup, fingernail polish or hair gel. She then strips bare and steps into the mikvah pool where she recites blessings and immerses herself.

“You totally bare your soul and yourself before God,” she said. “When you come out, it’s like being born again. You feel transformed.”

Mikvahs are most commonly associated with Orthodox Jews, although Jews of other branches also observe the rite. The Columbia effort is being led by a small group of Conservative, Reform and Hasidic Jews.

Rabbi Philip Silverstein said if a mikvah is built, it will likely be on the grounds of Beth Shalom, where he serves. A committee is studying the matter and will make a proposal to the synagogue’s board.

But the final say may be left to the congregation, which could vote on the matter soon.

“Some people are philosophically opposed to it, but for others, it’s a very religious observance,” said Bruce Filler, 50, the synagogue’s president. “It’s hard to say what will happen.”

Silverstein favors having a mikvah. But he says some Jews fear a mikvah will detract from the synagogue’s grounds, take money from other programs and be costly to maintain.

“To me, it’s not a priority,” said Ben Stern, 70, a synagogue trustee. “We have so many other things we...

Susan Hogan/Albach
The State (Columbia, SC)
Nov. 2, 1995
Mikvahs involve incredible upkeep. I won’t oppose it, but I can’t wholeheartedly support it, either,” Silverstein said. "Donors have pledged to raise the estimated $50,000 needed for a mikvah, so the building would not dip into other synagogue funds. However, the building site and maintenance issues haven’t been resolved.

Mikvahs usually look like small swimming pools and are deep enough so that water is chest-high. Jewish law prescribes that the water emanate from a natural source such as rain, snow, a running stream or ocean.

“We should not have to send our people out of town for rituals,” Silverstein said. "Progressive Jews see it as a form of regression, but I don’t see it that way.”

Transformation. Jean Brock’s eyes mist as she recounts the mikvah she undertook when she converted to Judaism a few years ago. The ritual was a “huge milestone” in her life that marked the moment she became a Jew.

“It was an awesome, life-changing experience,” said Brock, who attends Beth Shalom. "When you go down into that water, you leave behind your old identity and take on your new, Jewish identity. It’s like having a soul transplant.”

The murky waters of Arcadia Lake served as Brock’s mikvah site because she didn’t want to leave town. But some Jewish circles object to using lakes for mikvahs.

Erica Rosansky of Forest Acres said Columbia also needs a mikvah for families like hers who adopt non-Jewish children.

“We took our adopted boy with the rabbi to Augusta to the mikvah so he could become a Jewish boy,” said Rosansky, 35, of Beth Shalom.

“I think there are a whole lot of people who would use this if it were available here.”

Mikvah is considered a mitzvah, or commandment, for Jewish women, which is why it carries more weight for them than men. Women here say driving out of state is a hardship because they are required to do the ritual at night.

It’s uncertain how many women here use mikvahs. Because the ritual bath is often linked to married couples’ sexual habits, many women are secretive about their practice.

“I remember once as a girl asking my mother, who was leaving the house, where she was going, and she said, ‘Little girls don’t ask those kinds of questions of their mother,’” said Sheindal Muller, 27, a member of the Chabad Lubavitch in Columbia. “She was obviously going to the mikvah and wanted to keep that aspect of her life private for her and her husband.”

During menstruation and for seven days after, Muller and her husband abstain from all physical contact, even holding hands. She says it strengthens their relationship and elevates the intimacy, because it makes commitment and friendship — not sexuality — the heart of marriage.

A comeback. Mikvah is experiencing a resurgence after a period of decline after World War II. Some women had stopped the practice because the ritual houses weren’t well-kept.

Mikvah also lost favor in the 1970s with the rise of feminism and the sexual revolution. Some women believed the ritual limited women’s control over their bodies and promoted sexist views that women were unclean.

But today, a younger generation is reclaiming mikvah as an expression of feminist spirituality. Some bring new interpretations to the old ritual and may choose to have one for spiritual healing after a miscarriage, to cope with a cancer diagnosis or celebrate the aging process.

“I would describe myself as very strongly feminist,” Muller said. “Mikvah is the thing that fuses the feminist side of me with the spiritual side of me.”

Orthodox Jewish scholar Laurie Zoloth-Dorffman said younger women usually don’t associate mikvahs with uncleanness despite its ties to their menstrual cycles. Instead, they view it as an affirmation of their ability to give birth.

“Times have changed and the ritual isn’t going to have the same meaning for every generation,” said Zoloth-Dorffman, an ethicist from Berkeley, Calif. “Women are giving it a meaning that has relevance to who they are in a modern culture.”

Catherine Buck Morgan believes it’s important for Columbia to have a mikvah so women of all generations have the option of choosing to participate. She would use a mikvah if it were here, but doesn’t drive out of town for one.

“We as a Jewish community need to provide for our tradition,” said Morgan, 39, of West Columbia. "Women should have the right to choose whether they will use it.”