A break in faith?
Chico denominations show widening rift in Christian beliefs

Help each of us, gracious God, to live in such magnanimity and restraint that the Head of the Church may never have cause to say to any one of us, "This is my body, broken by you." — A Chinese prayer

Mike Newman remembers when Catholics had as little to do with Protestants as possible.

"When I grew up 50 years ago, we didn't play with kids who weren't Catholic, and it was a very odd thing for a Catholic to marry a non-Catholic," said Newman, a Catholic priest who is pastor at the Newman Center in Chico.

Now, thanks to the interfaith and ecumenical movements, such separatism is mostly a thing of the past, he said. "Many, many of us have learned respect. Catholics have learned respect for other people. We have the one God, even though we may have different ways of expressing our faith."

But while unity is growing among some Christian groups, a division seems to be widening between two large camps: more liberal "mainline" Christians and more conservative "evangelical" followers of the faith.

"I'm over 60, and I've seen the chasm grow between these

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The conference will likely be attended only by evangelical Christians, acknowledged the Rev. Larry Lane of Neighborhood Church. And in fact, some evangelical congregations will stay away because they are leery of the worship styles and viewpoints of some of the visiting evangelists.

Also, today in Fairfield, hearings get under way in which the United Methodist Church, a mainline body, will consider disciplining 67 of its California pastors who broke church rules a year ago by officiating at a "holy union ceremony" for two lesbians.

Among the 67 clergy are three from Chico: the Rev. Ellen Rowan of Trinity United Methodist Church, and two retired ministers, the Revs. Jerry Summers and Robert Rankin.
Pastors' blessing the union of a homosexual couple is strictly a mainline phenomenon. To most evangelicals, such a ceremony goes against the Bible and God. And there's division over the matter even within United Methodism. A minority faction of evangelical Methodist pastors strongly opposed the lesbians' ceremony in Sacramento last January. Some of them filed the complaint that led to this week's hearings.

Pastors in both mainline and evangelical camps say they wish the two groups could work together. Lane said he's "passionate about unity." He noted that Jesus said there should be one church. But the distance between many evangelical and mainline churches is vast, he asserted.

The CityReach.Net conference points to one deep fissure: these groups' differing attitudes toward seeking new members. How to evangelize effectively will be an important part of the Chico conference, Lane said.

"Some of my more mainline brothers would take offense at that. But according to the Bible, Jesus said we're to (make converts)."

The question is "how can we do that lovingly?" Lane asked.

"As an evangelical, I do believe people need to embrace Jesus Christ," he said. "I'm not out to be offensive. I love people. Jesus has made an incredible difference in my life. To share is my desire."

Newman and some others of the mainline fold have a much different view, preferring to let people find their own way to whatever faith they reach.

"It's not our job to make everybody Catholic," Newman said. "We're not out to convert. We want to reach out and touch — especially the poor. For most of the evangelicals, their thing is not to work with the poor, but to be saved."

Newman said he sees a lot of judgmentalism among evangelicals.

"Is Jesus the only way to God? Who are we to judge?" said the Rev. Mark Allen of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church in Paradise, part of a mainline denomination.

The Rev. Carl Wilfrid of Chico's Faith Lutheran Church agreed evangelism is a big point of division. The evangelicals "say Christ is leading his people to make Christians of everyone. I don't think so," Wilfrid said. "In history, most of the efforts to make Christians of everyone have been heavy-handed and violent."

"Nobody wants hate or bigotry," said the Rev. Neal Neuenburg, an evangelical pastor who leads Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Chico. Evangelism does not have to be intrusive or disrespectful, and mainliners are wrong to see it that way, he said.

"We want to bring the message that Jesus is the way to God," he said. "If you don't want to engage people in evangelism, how are you going to grow?"

A second major area of division is how God and the Bible are understood, as well as how these two groups perceive each others' views on these subjects and on morality generally.

As Neuenburg sees it, "there are no moral absolutes in the mainline churches. The Bible is no longer the standard." He said there are some basic beliefs about morality and theology that unite evangelicals but which many mainline Christians do not share.

He referred, he said, to "moral non-negotiables," such as "homosexuality is sin, life begins at conception, and extramarital (sexual) relations are sin," and also to core beliefs like "the Bible is absolute, Jesus is God and Lord, and our personal relationship with Jesus is the difference between heaven and hell."

Allen, who describes himself as "on the conservative side of the middle within (mainline) Episcopalianism," said Neuenburg raises interesting points about truth and absolutes, matters that could be discussed at length.

"A moral absolute for me is God's love for all his creation and the sanctity of life," he said. "I believe in God's creation there is truth, and in God's scripture there is truth. While I find truth in scripture, I find a lot of things I have to go over.

"I say God knows what the truth is, and I hope he will continue to reveal it to me, and I'll struggle with it."

Allen said, "At the bottom line is charity — love and acceptance. If we're really going to witness to the world as Christians, we've got to quit fighting among ourselves."

Lane said he's paired by the divisions within the Christian camps. Still, disagreements seem inevitable, he said. With certain mainline groups, he's "able to find some common ground. But others, he said, "have more in common with Eastern or New Age religions. How they would define Christianity is so distant from the original doctrines."

"I wish there could be some way to bring the Christian community together," Neuenburg said. But the gulf between evangelical and mainline denominations seems likely to widen, and splits within mainline denominations appear probable, he said.

Conservative United Methodists might form their own denomination or at least seek a separate conference within Methodism, he said, and similar breaks could happen in other mainline denominations, too.
A break in faith?
Three Paradise congregations join hands in unified service

An old hymn has the refrain "Let us break bread together."

Second of two parts on our knees."

Three Paradise pastors broke bread together recently — not on their knees, but around the dinner table.

Their fellowship bore fruit: a plan to bring their churches together for a worship service.

Attended by 422 people, the service among three different denominations was held Jan.

12 at St. Thomas More Catholic Church.

"It was really neat," said the Rev. Newt Kerney of Paradise Lutheran Church.

"The impact of it, from my perspective, was enormous for the people who were there," said the Rev. Mark Allen of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church.

"We had a wonderful experience of our oneness in Christ."

The service included a liturgy of repentance, music from the choirs and worship teams of the churches, and the lighting of candles by each pastor.

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In last October's agreement, the Catholics and Lutherans agreed on language acceptable to both groups to explain justification. According to the Rev. Mike Newman of the Newman Catholic Center in Chico, the accord stated, "you are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. Yet, if you have that faith, you will act upon it."

After the agreement was signed, Kerney contacted the Rev. Brendan McKeefry at St. Thomas More Church and suggested they get together. They decided to ask Allen to join them, too. After all, Kerney noted, the Episcopal and Lutheran churches had come directly out of the Catholic Church.

McKeefry hosted a dinner for Kerney and Allen and the two pastors' wives. That's where the plan was made for the joint service on Jan. 12.

It's always desirable to find what you have in common with religious brothers and sisters, as opposed to looking at the differences," said Kerney. "Then we have the ability to accomplish a lot more together.

The joint service was timed to coincide with what is known as the International Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Asked about Christian unity and the special week of prayer in support of it, the Rev. Donald Heinz of Chico said he hadn't heard mention of that week for some time. He was also surprised to hear that three Paradise churches had joined in worship in January.

They're ahead of Chico, said Heinz, a professor of religious studies at Chico State University, where he is also dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts. Heinz, who also is a Lutheran minister, said Chico's Faith Lutheran Church and St. John's Episcopal Church have had joint services for years, but so far they haven't included the Catholics.

"The goals of ecumenism are coming true, but not in the way we thought they would years ago," Heinz said. Back in the '50s, when the mainline churches began warming up to each other, many people thought groups like the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and others would combine to form one "super church," he said.

"That didn't happen. Yet, the coming together has been really quite dramatic in the last few decades."

Lutherans, Catholics, Episcopalians, the United Church of Christ, United Methodists and other mainline bodies have been talking to each other, and in some cases agreements have been made allowing a few denominations to have Holy Communion together and even to have each other's ministers serve their churches.

It would be a mistake, however, to look at January's service of unity in Paradise and conclude the religious community on the ridge is a model of unity. As in other places, a split exists between mainline and evangelical churches.
It's not warfare. In fact, Allen, the mainline Episcopal priest, said, "I have found a genuine charity among Christians of all stripes in Paradise."

Still, the mainline and evangelical camps are not together. Paradise has just one ministerial association, where pastors of different churches meet regularly to discuss common concerns.

Allen said when he came to the ridge a decade ago, the Paradise Ministerial Association was composed of mainline ministers, with one evangelical exception: the pastors of the Paradise Alliance Church.

When Allen took a turn at being president of the association, he invited the other evangelical pastors in Paradise to join the association. They did, and because they outnumber mainline ministers on the ridge, they came to dominate the group, Allen said.

As that happened, some of the mainline ministers dropped out.

"We tend to let those things that divide us (predominate)," Allen said. "There were some theological issues which rankled me more or less."

He no longer attends the association regularly, he said, although that has to do with time and convenience — not conflict with other pastors. Kerney said he's now the only mainline pastor regularly attending the group.

In Chico there are two such groups, the Chico Area Interfaith Council and the Pastors' Prayer Fellowship.

The Interfaith Council includes more liberal "mainline" Christian churches, like the Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics and Episcopalians, and also Chico's Jewish congregation, the Bahai group, and some churches, such as Religious Science and Unitarian, that don't identify themselves as Christian.

The Prayer Fellowship is composed of more conservative evangelical Christian ministers. It is led by a five-member steering committee, including Larry Lane of Neighborhood Church, the Rev. Peter Hansen of St. Augustine of Canterbury Episcopal Church, the Rev. Gaylord Enns of Pleasant Valley Assembly of God, the Rev. Dave Workman of Grace Community Church, and Chris Reyes of Vineyard Christian Fellowship.

The Interfaith Council hasn't had evangelical pastors regularly attending its meetings except for one: the Rev. Rod Brayfrindley, a former pastor of Aldersgate United Methodist Church. Also, recently, Peter Hansen has done some work with the council's Tolerance Task Force.

Larry Lane said the Interfaith Council goes beyond seeking Christian unity. It reaches out to all religious people, which isn't a typical aim of evangelicals. Though his own goals differ from the Interfaith Council's, Lane said he will treat its members "with love and respect."

Lane said one issue that brought pastors from both groups together, as well as their congregations, was feeding the homeless after the Jesus Center burned down.

The Rev. Carl Wilfrid of Faith Lutheran Church tried to bridge the gap between the two pastors' groups in Chico several years ago. He used to attend the Pastors' Prayer Fellowship with another mainline minister, the Rev. Gregg Sneller, former pastor of First Baptist Church.

Wilfrid said he has roots in both camps. He's always been a mainline Lutheran. Yet, when he was young, he was very active in a youth group of the Evangelical Free Church.

Attending the Pastors' Prayer Fellowship when it first started "was meaningful for me, but strange," Wilfrid said. He wasn't comfortable with the worship style of raising one's hands while singing, for instance.

“There was a good deal of respect and openness,” he said. But some projects of the group seemed to accentuate the differences between him and most of the other pastors, Wilfrid said. He felt less comfortable and stopped attending.

“It’s too bad, he said, adding, “There are a dozen or so pastors in that group for whom I have a lot of respect. I wish we could work together more.”

Wilfrid summarized his thoughts on unity in this way: "There has always been competitiveness between churches. It has something to do with a real basic sin — wanting to be right, or better than, or whatever — and I think churches always need to be on the alert for that sin.

“Since 1950, that's barely 50 years, the ecumenical movement has made great strides,” Wilfrid said. “A lot of churches that used to be in competition ... are much, much more cooperative with each other.

“I know the pastors in the Pastors’ Prayer Fellowship several years ago confessed to each other the sin of competitiveness and celebrated the cooperation in the prayer fellowship as a new movement.

“If you're going to be establishing relationships with people with whom you've been fighting or competing, or haven't had relationships, you probably do the easier ones first and the harder ones later. And that's where I think we are now.”
A house divided

North valley ministers, parishioners try to bridge a gaping philosophical split in the United Methodist Church

After years of chilly relations, Chico's two United Methodist churches are warming up to each other—just when the ice could be the thickest.

An 82-year-old churchgoer, Hal Gibbs, who now attends the more conservative Aldersgate church and used to belong to the more liberal Trinity church, sparked the thaw.

Because of him, leaders of the two churches met last month to see if they can be friendlier and perhaps do some activities together.

Earlier this year, Gibbs said he started thinking about the split between the

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two churches. He said the Rev. Neal Neuenburg of Aldersgate and the Rev. Ellen Rowan of Trinity mainly push their own views and have little to do with each other.

"I want to get them working together," he said. He approached the two pastors and their superintendent and found them willing to explore cooperating.

While there's no direct connection, the local effort at bridge-building parallels an effort by a regional group of conservative United Methodist pastors to extend an olive branch to their more liberal brethren.

For many months, the conservative group, known as the Evangelical Renewal Fellowship, has battled the denomination's regional leadership over issues like pastors' conducting "holy union" ceremonies for homosexual couples. Bitter words have been spoken and angry letters written.

Soon, however, a different kind of letter from the conservative group will be sent to Bishop Beverly Shamana and other leaders of the denomination's California/Nevada Conference, which takes in Northern California and Nevada.

Its message will be, "We seek healing," said Aldersgate's Neuenburg, who had the idea to send the letter.
About 20 ministers of the conservative fellowship met last month in Merced and supported trying to reconcile with conference leaders, Neuenburg said. They had gathered to regroup amid one of the rockiest times in church history in California.

Neuenburg, who’s been active in the conservative fellowship for a number of years, said the group found itself “at a crossroads.” Fellowship members have been at odds with the majority of ministers in the region over the 1999 blessing of a lesbian couple’s relationship.

Nearly 70 ministers participated in that ceremony in Sacramento. Many more of the conference’s more than 300 active clergy supported it, while some others disapproved.

The 30 to 40 conservative pastors of the evangelical fellowship were among the most strident opponents. They called for punishing the ministers who participated.

And a handful of fellowship members withheld church money that was supposed to go to the denomination for various purposes.

The conservatives had hoped to be vindicated at the United Methodist national conference in May. They proposed a number of resolutions at that meeting and won some victories but not all they wanted. The national conference agreed pastors who blessed homosexual relationships violated church law. But it also refused to let conservative pastors sever ties with the California/Nevada Conference and set up their own conference in the West.

Some fellowship members felt abandoned by their denomination. Neuenburg said over the last couple of years about 15 ministers have resigned. Six of those left the denomination this summer, some taking many church members with them.

The recent resignations have changed the dynamics of the liberal-conservative struggle in Northern California, he said.

Neuenburg said he and others in the conservative fellowship who have decided to remain United Methodist felt they “were tainted by the departures of the others. There was a question of our loyalty.”

For him especially, the issues came into sharp focus, he said. Previously, he was pastor of Hope United Methodist Church in Sacramento. He nurtured that church and shepherded it through the construction of new buildings.

He was upset to learn recently that the church’s latest pastor, Greg Smith, had left, taking most of the congregation with him. “They moved down the block to Valley High School and now call themselves Valley Grace Community Church,” Neuenburg said.

“A dynamic church has been ripped apart,” he said. “They took the heart and core. Took the youth, most of the younger adults, and left a church of older people who have been loyal for many years and believe God has called them to stay. Families are split. It’s a real painful kind of departure from each other.

“I personally feel it’s unethical and lacks integrity for a pastor to pull people out of a church and start a new church in the same town,” he went on.

In an interview, Pastor Smith said it was wrong to say he started a new church.

Actually, the move was “a congregational decision,” he said. The congregation met many times before taking the decisive step.

The holy-union blessing in Sacramento was the catalyst, but really much broader issues are at the heart of the conflict, he said. There is disagreement about such things as “the authority of scripture and who is Jesus,” he said.

As evangelicals in a predominately liberal conference, he said, his congregation felt it couldn’t fully participate: Members weren’t comfortable sending youngsters to conference-sponsored youth camps, for instance.

**Gone too far?**

In July, Neuenburg began talking to other members of the conservative Evangelical Renewal Fellowship about whether the fight over the holy-union blessing and some other issues had gone too far. Many agreed it had.
The remaining 20 to 30 members of the fellowship have decided to take a new approach, seeking reconciliation, Neuenburg said. A letter to the rest of the conference has been written. A draft of that letter said the United Methodist Church in California has been looking more "united" than "united." It asks, "Have the wounds become so deep" that a united church is no longer possible? And it answers that the authors of the letter believe respect and cooperation are still possible.

"There has been so much hostility and anger," Neuenburg said. "We want to work at healing and rebuilding the trust relationship in the conference."

"We're still going to hold to our convictions," he added. "We know we're not going to convince each other. We're going to try to go beyond these differences and focus on our mission again, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ."

The departure of conservative pastors from churches in places like Kingsburg, Oakdale, Santa Clara, Susanville, Richmond, Yuba City, Selma, Sacramento, Fresno, Atwater, Tehachapi and Cameron Park has left a more conciliatory conservative fellowship, he said. The pastors who remain hold their convictions just as strongly as ever, but they see both the progress of their group and the work of the denomination in a positive light. Those who left see it all pretty negatively and were the ones most ready to fight, Neuenburg said.

**Christ under attack?**

The pastors who left will say homosexuality is the big issue, but in fact it's "just the tip of the iceberg," Neuenburg said. "They believe the deity of Christ and the Resurrection are under attack."

The conservative-liberal split is nothing new in Methodism, he said. The Evangelical Renewal Fellowship has been around since 1972, and before that there was a similar group.

Disagreement is probably inevitable in this denomination, which has always allowed a wide range of views, he said. Ever since their beginning in England in the 1700s, Methodists have been "an evangelistic church."

The idea has been, he said, "if you come into a personal relationship with Jesus, if your heart is right with God, we can be brothers and sisters."

There aren't a lot of other requirements, he said. "It allows for real openness and freedom. It's very basic Christianity" that appeals "to a wide diversity of folks."

When he became a Methodist minister 30 years ago, Neuenburg said he faced the same dilemma other conservatives confront now as they consider whether to stay or leave. He knew he was more conservative than most in the denomination, especially in California. After a lot of thought and prayer, he said, he realized "God had called me to be an evangelical presence and witness within the United Methodist Church. My mission was and is to share the gifts God has given me within this more liberal church."

He's glad he joined and glad he's stayed a United Methodist, he said. "There's a lot of good work going on within this church."

He noted the denomination has 375 churches in Northern California and Nevada and 36,000 churches around the nation with more than 8 million members. There are 5,000 United Methodist churches with 14 million members in other countries.

"I'm proud of it - glad to be a part of it," he said. "It's not the perfect church. It's the one God has called me to. I can support 85 to 90 percent of what's going on."

"I appreciate the freedom we have," he said. "We accept people wherever they are."

**An olive branch**

Although it's not directly related to the peace offering of evangelical pastors within the conference, Neuenburg's church in Chico, Aldersgate, recently made an overture to Trinity, the more liberal Chico church, led by the Rev. Ellen Rowan, one of the 68 participants in the controversial holy-union blessing.

The move sprang from the vision of Aldersgate member Hal Gibbs. He was a member of Trinity, but he and his wife left last year and joined Aldersgate.

Ironically, a conference in Chico earlier this year that attracted mostly conservative Christians - and probably very few United Methodists - got Gibbs thinking about closer relations between Aldersgate and Trinity.
The Cityreach.Net Conference, sponsored by the decidedly evangelical Neighborhood Church, emphasized reconciliation.

Gibbs said he liked the conference but was disappointed that it didn’t offer any concrete programs to bring people together. “I was really enthusiastic about trying to do something,” he said. As he prayed about it, he said he heard God calling for “someone to spearhead” a drive for closer ties between the two Chico Methodist churches.

“The good Lord said, ‘Hal, I want you to do this,’” Gibbs said. He’s headed many church projects over the years and wasn’t eager to take on another, but what could he say? He talked to his current and former pastors, as well as the Rev. Ruth Cortez, the district superintendent. They were all agreeable to working toward more harmony.

A meeting was held in August and another is planned in the fall. Gibbs said he’d like to get youth and choir directors of the two churches together to talk about possible cooperative efforts.

Aldersgate, which now has about 160 people attending each Sunday, began in 1958 as a satellite church in the north part of town started by some members of Trinity, which is located downtown. For quite a while, Aldersgate’s worship style and theology were similar to those of Trinity. Since the mid-1980s, more conservative pastors have been assigned to Aldersgate, and the two churches have diverged. Of course, each church has members with various views. But the pastors and many members have disagreed over such issues as abortion and homosexuality.

There’s been a definite coolness between Trinity and Aldersgate. At times, some members migrated from one church to the other. The two congregations have gone about their business almost as if they belonged to different denominations.

Gibbs said he doesn’t see the need for separateness.

“Even in conflict, we don’t hate each other,” he said. “We love the Methodist Church.”

Asked about the new effort toward reconciliation, Pastor Rowan said she’s all for it.

“What I’m hoping is we can model how people with different opinions on some issues can still work together in areas where they do agree,” she said.

Perhaps members of the two churches together could build a Habitat for Humanity home for a poor family, she suggested. “Helping the poor is part of following Jesus,” she said.

Neuenburg spoke similarly: “We recognize we’re not going to change each other. But we’re still brothers and sisters in Christ.”

Disagreement on certain issues will continue, Neuenburg said, but he said he hopes that out of the rubble of the recent battle, “God is going to resurrect a new church that may be more loving, more accepting, more forgiving.”
Hmong family funeral steeped in tradition

With three days of prayer, music and ritual, a Hmong family bid farewell to an elder in Chico this week.

Sia Lee Thao, 80, of Chico was a decorated war veteran and a mentor for the younger generation, said his nephew Randy Thao.

Randy talked about his uncle and explained the elaborate funeral ritual in a recent interview at Bidwell Chapel.

“He was always telling us to work hard and be patient,” Randy said of the elder Thao. One of his mottos was “Think before you say, and say before you act,” he added.

Thao was born in Laos and grew up to be a village chief. From 1965 to 1975, he served in the Laotian Army. Under the command of America’s CIA, he fought against the communists. After the United States pulled out of

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Southeast Asia and the communists overran South Vietnam and Laos, it was dangerous for soldiers like Thao to remain in their homeland.

He was among many who escaped to Thailand. There, he lived in refugee camps until 1987, when he came to the United States.

According to Randy Thao, some Hmong who live in America have become Christian, but others, like his uncle did, still follow the traditional ways.

Thao’s funeral at Bidwell Chapel was very traditional. It began on Sunday and continued without a break through Tuesday afternoon. People came and went during the ceremonies. At times they napped on the chapel’s pews.

According to traditional Hmong beliefs, a person has several spirits, and when he has died, these spirits must return to the place where he was born, Randy said. There, the deceased will meet his parents, grandparents and other relatives who have passed on before.

Randy described the Hmong funeral as an event where friends and surviving relatives express their love and gratitude to the person who has died and where efforts are made to impart the wisdom of the deceased to the living.

During the ceremony, relatives and friends offer gold paper to the deceased. It represents money that will be needed in the other world.
On the first day of the funeral, a guide gives the deceased instructions on how to return to where he was born. As the guide goes through this journey, some of the gold paper money is offered as thanks from the deceased to countries, such as the United States and Thailand, which helped him during his life.

At times in the ceremony, maals are symbolically offered to the deceased. These offerings are accompanied by special playing of a drum and an instrument called a qeej, which has been described as a bamboo mouth organ. It makes a low whining sound, which blends with the somber chanting of mourners.

Randy said he fears this musical tradition will be lost. It is difficult to learn to play the qeej, and young Hmong have little time to learn it amid their heavy responsibilities of school and work.

During parts of the funeral, a speaker talks on behalf of the deceased, giving his survivors, especially the children, advice, such as the importance of staying in school and succeeding.

In his military career, Thao attained the rank of second lieutenant. In 1997, he and other Hmong and Lao combat veterans received the Vietnam Veterans National Medal, as well as a special citation from Congress.

Thao died April 23 in Chico. He had four sons and two daughters. One of his sons died in the war. The other three live in the United States. He also had three brothers. One is living in the United States, another lives in Laos, and the third has died.

Thao’s burial was Tuesday in Chico Cemetery. He was honored with a 21-gun salute and the playing of “Taps” by the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Saying goodbye doesn’t end with the burial, Randy said. Thirteen days later, family members return to the cemetery to hold a service of “spiritual release.”

According to traditional Hmong beliefs, Randy said, one of the deceased’s spirits remains in the grave waiting for the family to visit again and wake him up so that he may go.
A good theme song for Chico evangelist Louie Ricci might be “Give Me That Old-time Religion.”

He's sure of the correctness of the time-honored goals of Christian living and the traditional content of worship.

He deplores what he considers the world's encroaching on the Christian life.

"It isn't that I'm trying to be an old fuddy-duddy," he said in an interview. He just doesn't see why innovation is necessary when "Christ hasn't changed."

Ricci, 77, hardly followed a conventional path to becoming a minister. He never attended seminary nor was ordained. What he has done is studied the Bible closely.

He's an evangelist-about-town who might pop up anywhere.

Like at the Twin Oaks and Sierra Sunrise nursing homes, where he visits residents and likes to lead Alzheimer's patients in singing "Amazing Grace." Or he can be found preaching to a new congregation that's still arranging for a permanent pastor. Some days, he works at The Well, a ministry for people who "have hit rock-bottom and want to change," he said.

Over the years, he's officiated at more than 800 funerals for people who had no church and pastor.

You might also meet him on the editorial page through one of his brief letters to the editor that invariably ends with, "Christ is the answer!"

Ricci's followed a long and twisting path to where he is today.

"I'm so grateful that every so often in my life, God has had to make sure he's humbled me and got my attention, sometimes in pretty dramatic ways," he said. "He has to work overtime on Italians to keep us humble."

One such occasion was when Ricci was in the real estate business in Illinois in the early 1960s. He'd been doing pretty well, but then "rough economic times" hit, and he and his wife, Beverly, lost everything.

They decided to move to California and landed in Chico.

Ricci began here by selling radio ads and then got a job with Angelo Volpato, running his used-car department. He held that position for 25 years.

Off the job, Ricci pursued his work as an evangelist. He was a substitute preacher at many local churches, and for nine years was the pastor at Grace Brethren Church. He got involved with the mission in Oroville and ministered to drug abusers.

"Work needed to be done in the churches here in Chico," he said. "God gave me the privilege of doing this work, but he had to bust me to get me to California."

He sees the hand of God at work in the development of his faith.

Ricci attended a Catholic church when he was growing up in Illinois during the Depression.

A tent revival in his neighborhood impressed him.

He and his friend Nick walked up close to hear what was going on, he said. "The preacher was telling the people, 'There's hope. There's hope in Jesus Christ.'"

"I said to Nick: Do you think they believe what he's saying?" He said, 'They better. They don't have anything else.'"

The economic slump of the 1930s had its silver lining, Ricci said. "Out of the Depression came some great Christians, who never would have come without that being tested."

When he was in the service during World War II, Ricci was neutral toward religion. But a fellow serviceman who was a Christian impressed him.

"Jim Chatham was different," Ricci said. "He didn't cuss and he didn't drink or gamble. When the first atomic bomb was dropped, he told us, 'We have to pray about it.' And he led us in prayer."

In the years after the war, Ricci, living with his family in Decatur, Illinois, was a lukewarm Christian, who attended a Protestant church and even taught Sunday school.

One weekend, the pastor of the Church of the Nazarene knocked on his door, wanting to get acquainted.

The minister, Les Wooten, asked Ricci if he knew
anything about his church.

"I said, 'Oh, you believe a lot of crazy stuff,'" Ricci said.

"Wooten responded, 'I believe in being dedicated and practicing self-denial,'" Ricci said.

"I wasn't really sold on that,' he added.

Nevertheless, Ricci said he started attending the Church of the Nazarene and found himself growing spiritually. Wooten "planted a lot of seeds," he said.

In 1957, Ricci said he was called to be a minister. The feeling was intense. "I was actually shaken out of bed," he said. "After seven or eight months of fighting it, I finally told the pastor, 'God wants me to preach.'"

Wooten talked to Ricci about attending a seminary.

"How could I go to school? I had three kids at the time," he said. (And a fourth came along later.)

A few weeks after that, Ricci got the chance to preach. Wooten was called out of town unexpectedly and he asked Ricci to fill in on Sunday.

Ricci said he didn't prepare a sermon but rather "put God on the spot" by just speaking from the heart.

"When it was done, people stood up and said they appreciated what I'd had to say," Ricci said.

The rest is history.

Today, Ricci has strong opinions about religion and life.

"Where we fall down in our churches is that we don't emphasize who Christ is," he said. "He is the God-man. God in the flesh. He is the creator. He put it together from the beginning."

Ricci is certain that homosexuality is contrary to God's will. It's true God loves homosexuals, he said, but "God wants them to get out from that."

"Christ and the things of the world are separate," he said. "We're bringing the world and the world's music into the church."

The changes in church music really bother him. Traditional hymns like "Amazing Grace," "The Old Rugged Cross," and "In the Garden" can't be surpassed, he said.

It's a mistake to introduce modern music in the hope of attracting young people, he feels. Youngsters may come to worship service, but if they come for the music, they may be there for the wrong reasons.

"There is real magic in Christianity," he said, "the magic of when our hearts are moved because of what God's done — the magic that can only be known because you're there."

Why does he end every letter to the editor with "Christ is the answer"?

"That's the key," he said. "Recognizing nothing can take the place of what Christ has provided — God himself, in the flesh."

"God says, 'I've got something planned for you.' The beautiful part is it's going to be right even when we don't understand it."