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A small Episcopal church grows in Orange City

By Janine Calsbeek

ORANGE CITY – High oil prices. A new location, easy to heat. A decision to worship closer to home.

And a church is born.

That's the Church of the Savior's story... or part of it.

The small congregation at St. George's Episcopal Church in Le Mars was having a tough time heating the sanctuary one winter. It's the oldest church in Plymouth County, said Karen Wacome, with horsehair plaster and less-than-adequate insulation. "It's a big open space, incredibly expensive to heat."

The parish hall was used as a preschool, and inadequate for worship services.

And, since two-thirds of the congregation traveled to Le Mars from Orange City on Sunday mornings, they decided to find a temporary worship location here. Northwestern College rented its choir room to the church.

That was the winter of '06. The following summer, the congregation, after conversation with its diocese, decided to continue worshipping in Orange City. And in November '07, the diocese accepted the Church of the Savior as a new Episcopal church in Iowa.

The church still meets in the choir room, at the east end of Northwestern's Christ Chapel and DeWitt Music Hall... but members are investigating purchasing a facility, said Wacome.

Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome is the pastor of Church of the Savior.

Wise to say 'yes'

Wacome is a New Jersey girl, who grew up in Independent Baptist and Orthodox Presbyterian churches... though she remembers her father reading Calvin's Institutes to the family on Sundays. She didn't believe in the ordination of women, she said, and the idea of working in church leadership didn't cross her mind. She studied psychology and Biblical studies at King's College and Yale, and put her husband Don through school, working secretarial, research technician and factory jobs.

She had always considered the Episcopal church too liberal for her, but when the Wacomes visited an Episcopal parish in New York, they loved it.

And the pastor was an evangelical.

They became part of that church. "We never looked back."

So when the Wacomes moved to Orange City in '91 – Don teaches philosophy at Northwestern – they found that the closest Episcopal church here was St. George's in Le Mars.

Most Episcopal churches in Iowa are small, under 100 members, said Wacome. St. Thomas' in Sioux City is the largest in the area.

St. George's had six to 12 members, and was served by supply pastors for years. The church needed a pastor.

Wacome, in the meantime, had been sensing a call by God. "I thought I was mistaken." So she ignored it, assuming the still, small voice would go away.

"I did this for a decade."

Eventually, however, the call became clear. People, scripture, experience – all pointed towards Wacome becoming a pastor. When she told her mentor in New York, Nancy Hanna, that she wasn't sure whether she believed in the ordination of women, Hanna said, "If God wants you to be a pastor, you will be." And God would convince her of the rightness of that.

Marnie Wright from St. George's also encouraged Wacome to think about her calling. "She gently guided me."

And Wacome studied scripture. People tend to have fixed ways of reading the

Bible, she said, but when you read in the original languages, and in context, your understanding changes. "What does the cross mean for us as male and female? What does it mean, to redeem creation?"

Not everyone agrees with her as far as women in church leadership, of course. "I understand that."

But Wacome believes she was called. "You kind of know when you are saying 'yes' or 'no' to God.

"And since God is real and alive, and not just a set of ideas or doctrines, I thought it was wise to say 'yes.'" She hasn't doubted since.

Wacome studied at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific and Graduate Theological Union in northern California, and eventually earned her doctorate in Biblical studies. She became pastor of St. George's in '96, she recalls, and was ordained 10 years ago. She teaches part-time in Northwestern's religion department also.

A team ministry

The church has grown. Approximately three dozen people worship at the Church of the Savior each week, more when college is in session. Many congregation members are students or staff at Northwestern. Several Le Mars members decided to return to St. George's, so that church remains viable also.

Wacome is part-time pastor, and Church of the Savior has developed into "very much a team ministry." Lynn Trapp, Mike Kugler and Don Wacome serve as lay pastors. Heather Josselyn-Cranson and Erin Scholtens head the music ministry. Others are lay readers and lectors.

When Wacome was absent one summer, helping care for her father, "everyone ran the church fine without me."

The Episcopal Church comes out of the English Reformation, said Wacome, formed during the Revolutionary War, when it split from the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church, by the way, shouldn't be associated with Henry VIII and his desire to get rid of his wives, she said with a smile. "It was his daughter, Queen Elizabeth, who transformed the English church.

"Our motto is 'scripture, reason, tradition,'" continued Wacome. "Scripture is paramount, and reason moderates tradition."

Episcopalians hold much in common with Reformed and Lutheran churches, she said. In fact, Wacome noticed that one of the RCA hymnals includes a service almost identical to the Episcopal service of morning prayer.

Church of the Savior is not a "high church," said Wacome, but the worship style is liturgical. They use the lectionary, and every Sunday the service includes four lessons, readings from the Old Testament, Psalms, the Epistles and the Gospel. They also use the Book of Common Prayer, which is 75 percent scripture, and similar to Jewish prayer books. Actually, the organization of the service reflects ancient Jewish liturgical structure, said Wacome.

The first part of the service is the Word of God, with scripture, music and the sermon related to the Bible lessons. Music includes four hymns... old hymns from the fifth century, new ones, and others from many traditions in-between. Parts of the service are sung also.

Written and spontaneous prayers are said for the world, the community, the church and individuals, and are followed by a general confession, and passing of the peace.

The Great Thanksgiving, later in the service, is the story of the death and resurrection of Christ, and the service of communion. Both wine and grape juice are offered, and all Christians are welcome to partake. "We leave it between (each person) and God," said Wacome.

There's an informal element to Church of the Savior too. Some wear jeans, others drink coffee during church. And following the sermon is a 10 or 15-minute discussion, related to the lessons. People make comments and ask questions. "After all, if you can't ask questions about God in church, where can you?" said Wacome.

Wacome appreciates the diversity in the Episcopal church – both the liberal and conservative branches. Much of the church is orthodox, parts are evangelical. Church of the Savior is, she said, from the Reformed tradition of the Episcopal church.

The liturgy concentrates on who Christ is, she said, "very focused on God and

scripture." She values that. "And we hear the story of the death and resurrection every week."

Years ago, Wacome wondered if she'd appreciate a liturgical church. She does. It's far from boring; instead the repetition is a reinforcement of scripture, she said. The lessons and prayers become part of you, deepening your faith. When Terry Waite was taken hostage in '87, he pulled from his Anglican background and began saying and praying the beginning of the service to himself... for strength.

And the Episcopal tradition, as the Reformed, said Wacome, "does not ask you to leave your mind at the door."

All are welcome to visit the Church of the Savior. Services begin at 10 a.m. on Sundays. Park in the Northwestern chapel parking lot and enter the music building from the north. For more information, check the church's blog: <http://www.cosoc.blogspot.com/>



The pastor

Pastor of Church of the Savior is the Rev. Dr. Karen Wacome. It's an Episcopal church, nested by St. George's Episcopal in Le Mars. The purpose at the church, said Wacome, is "to proclaim Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection, and to think about how we live out the gospel in our daily lives." (Photo by Janine Calsbeek)

