Preaching and serving: Going on 90

BY DANIEL ARENS

It's true that Pastor Elden Zuern has not been preaching for 90 years. But he turns 90 years old May 27, and that milestone birthday isn't deterring him from continuing his life work.

Elden and his wife Norma, returned to a house north of Hazen in the early 2000s after spending many years in other states. Since that point, Elden has worked with local churches in the Hazen area, notably serving St. Paul Lutheran Church between Hazen and Pick City on the first and fifth Sundays of each month, with Pastor Bill Wagner covering the remainder of the days.

Several members of that congregation conspired to give Elden a surprise birthday party on May 6. Although Norma was in the know, Elden said the surprise was carried out successfully.

"It was a big surprise to me," he said. "They named it 'Pastor Zuern Sunday.'" He added that the church used a supposed May Day celebration to throw him off about the preparations for the party.

"I was quiet about it for a long time," Norma said. "I told Linda the night before that the congregation members hosting the party just work together very well."

Linda is the daughter of Elden and Norma. She lives in Massachusetts, where the Zuerns spent a large part of their lives, but is visiting her parents. They had one other daughter, Paula, who is deceased.

The party celebrated the life of a well-known community member, who has also left a lasting impact in many places around the United States. Norma said that trying to focus the party on relatives would be too hard, as there are simply too
many of them, so she thought working with the church for the birthday celebration would be the way to go. Besides the St. Paul congregation, others in attendance at the party included several local pastors (Wagner, Mary Lou Aune, and Walt Wolf). Elen is an ordained pastor with the United Church of Christ, but also works with other churches and denominations. For example, this coming Sunday he will preach a message at Peace Lutheran Church in Hazen.

Elden grew up in a house just west of where the Zuerns currently live, and Norma grew up a mile away. They knew each other growing up, and they still own the property where Elden was raised. Throughout his life, the ministry dominated Elden’s thoughts.

“I guess I kind of felt like I was called into ministry, with a few interruptions,” he said.

At first, Elden worked at the drug store in Hazen, while he was a junior in high school. A future in pharmaceuticals was not for him, however, as the long hours spent in the shop, combined with school hours and schoolwork, became overwhelming.

At that time, Elden attended New Bethel Congregational Church, and a discussion with the brother of that church’s pastor inspired him to look into ministry.

“At that point, I said, ‘Well, God, if you still want me to go into ministry, it’s up to you,’” he said.

Elden attended a theology school in Yankton, S.D., doing church work in the summer. He married Norma in 1947; the couple celebrated their 70th anniversary last year. The following year, Elden accepted a student ministry position in Oklahoma, and for the next four years they lived in that state, where both their daughters were born. He was ordained at St. Paul Congregational Church in Shattuck, Okla., on Aug. 7, 1949, and it was the first church he served as senior pastor for.

After that, they spent seven years in McLaughlin, S.D., before moving on yet again to Massachusetts.

Elden served numerous churches in Massachusetts, notably in Quincy, where he was the pastor for Quincy Point Congregational Church. He also served as a probation officer, the Protestant chaplain for the juvenile court, and visited Protestant hospital residents as a chaplain as well.

“I guess I always went with the flow,” he said.

Elden served with numerous Christian and social services organizations, such as the Protestant Social Service Bureau, the Christian Education Fellowship and the Association of United Church Educators, the latter of which he helped found.

“I did a lot of chairmanships,” he said. “It just seemed to be my ability or something.”

“I was very active in the civic part of the community,” he added. “I was instrumental in getting the mental health center in our area.”

He explained that, when other sections within the town of Quincy opposed adding the mental health center to their area, Zuern argued that the facility would decrease, not increase, worries about having the mentally ill in the section, because they would be in the health center and not on the streets.

Other churches Elden served at in Massachusetts included First Congregational Church in Malden, Pleasant Street Congregational Church in Arlington, Bethany Congregational Church, and Wollaston Congregational Church. He preached at Wollaston for 18 years, and the congregation made him “pastor emeritus” after he retired.

Elden is also an active life member in many clubs, such as the Lions Organization, Germans from Russia, and the Freemasons. In addition, he has been on many trips, both with youth ministry and with his family. He and Norma have visited every state in the Union, excepting Alaska and Hawaii.

“I’ve had a full life, a very rewarding life,” he said.

“We moved back here after my retirement,” Elden said of their return to North Dakota. The term “retirement” is used loosely, as Elden has continued preaching since his return in 2003.

During the 1990s, Norma would come up to the area each year to visit her dad in Beulah. In 2000, the Zuerns bought the house they now live in, although they did not leave Massachusetts and move full-time into that house until another three years passed.

The Zuerns visited Massachusetts once since their return to North Dakota. They said that what they miss most, besides the churches and people they served with and knew, is the East Coast seafood.

Until recently, Elden was also a passionate motorcycle enthusiast, earning the nickname “Revvin’ Rev” from friends. Although he had to give up the motorcycle after health challenges prevented him from continuing to ride it, he still makes use of a 4-wheeler to take care of the property.

Despite their age, Elden and Norma continue to own their own house and property, with two floors, a garage, and a couple sheds included.

“But we enjoy the place here,” Elden said. “She’d like to downsize, because this is a big house for our age. But we’ve done a few things to make it easier to take care of."

Their daughter Linda also visits at times to help with some of the needs of the house, and to provide a thorough cleaning when she is around.

“What I can’t do, I have some friends that are just so helpful,” Elden went on. These include not only helping out with different needs, but also gifts to the Zuerns.

“I don’t know how many people have made me gifts from the churches we’ve been at,” Norma said.

Elden said the most rewarding part of his work is hearing from people whose families have been impacted and changed as a result of his ministry.

“You just can’t put a dollar sign on something like that,” he said.

Local pastors came together to celebrate the 90th birthday of one of their own. From left to right: Pastors Bill Wagner, Elden Zuern, Mary Lou Aune and Walt Wolf.