

Not your average place of worship

At first glance, the Boring United Methodist Church appears to be just your average neighborhood church.

But the inside is entirely unique. First of all, very little is known about the history of the church. Then, there is an absence of stained glass windows, but in their place are some beautiful windows of pressed leaves. And the final difference is that the pastor of the Boring church is a woman.

The church's history is somewhat vague because the congregation split some time ago and many of the current church-goers joined recently. The church became part of the Connectional Methodist system in 1904, which means a pastor was appointed at that time, according to Pastor Elisabeth Gray.

One of the congregation, Joanna Ritter, said that the church was officially dedicated June 23, 1907 when it was the Methodist Episcopal Church. The president of Willamette University at the time, Dr. John H. Coleman, was the guest speaker.

One of the church's original pews still stands inside, a testimony to the long history of the building. The pulpit was handcrafted in oak by George Perret in 1950 and donated by Orville and Lucy Boring.

The newest decorations are leaves and flowers from all over the world, pressed and made into windows by Jo Van Houten. Included are leaves from many of the states, a daisy from Jerusalem, a rose petal which fell on a walk near the Canterbury Cathedral, a flower from the Isle of Rhodes, another from Cypress and even a leaf from a maple tree in the yard of the Boring church.

The condition of the church is far from perfect, however. A broken window mars the tower; the white coat of paint is several years old. These projects may take time, but they are all being planned, according to Pastor Gray.

The biggest project, however, is a June 14 celebration of the church's 77th anniversary. Gray plans a children's creative workshop as part of the celebration, a slight departure from the traditional vacation Bible school.

She hopes to help the children write and perform a play.

"I wanted us to have something a little more unusual," she said. "We're really excited about the anniversary and children are so creative, a workshop seemed the perfect thing."

Along with the anniversary plans, which include old-time fiddling and a barbecue, Gray hopes to dig up a little more history about the church. Some maintenance work is planned — a little painting, a little window repair and some fundraising to buy a new stove.

The projects are nothing unusual for a little neighborhood church and from the outside, passersby probably won't even know the difference.

It takes a closer look to realize that the Boring United Methodist Church is not an average place of worship.



Pressed leaf windows are unique.



Pastor Elisabeth Gray and Mabel Johnson outside the Boring United Methodist Church.

stories, photos

by Mark Floyd



Pastor Gray came to Boring after serving as chaplain at South Fork Prison.

A woman becomes pastor From prison to the pulpit

The road to the pulpit hasn't necessarily been a smooth one for Elisabeth Gray, but she knew she would get there eventually.

It was in her blood. Pastor Gray took over as minister of the Boring United Methodist Church last year. And while she is one of the few women ministers in this part of the state, the pastor is one of many in her family.

"I come from a long line of pastors," she said. "My mother (Elisabeth Hampton) was a Methodist minister and my father (Harry Hampton) was an ordained Presbyterian minister. They're both retired now. My mother's parents were missionaries in South America and my father is from the Hampton family — John Hampton came to the country in the early 1700s and was thrown in prison because he was a Presbyterian minister."

"I have more than 20 relatives serving as ministers or missionaries now, mostly in South America or Africa," she added.

With a family background that oriented to religion, it is little surprise that Gray followed suit.

"I've known from the time I was little that I was supposed to be a minister," she admitted. "When I was in third grade in Reedville, I lived next door to the church and it was next to the school. I'd stop on the way home, go up to the pulpit and preach to a congregation that wasn't there."

It was a long time before Gray was able to preach to a real church congregation, although she certainly earned the right. She traveled with a singing group called "The Sonlites," touring Oregon and conducting church services. The head of the

Oregon Gospel Ministries heard Gray and asked her if she would consider working with prisons.

She didn't answer immediately — in fact, it took her several months to finally make a decision — and in 1972 she took over as chaplain at South Fork Prison on the Wilson River Highway.

"I've been very well accepted here. I consider myself a pastor first, then a woman. I'm not out to prove that I can do a man's job."

"We held services Sunday morning and on Saturdays we were allowed to let the families and children of the prisoners come to prison," she recalled. "We had Bible studies, picnics and several of the men were baptized in the river. And it was cold!"

"We had someone escape from South Fork once and we knew where he was," she added. "His wife was taking their daughter out-of-state and he wanted to see her once more. It was difficult to decide just when to tell the officials where he was."

Gray also put in some time at Hillcrest, a reform school for girls, and MacLaren, a boys' reform school. She said that she was more apprehensive at Hillcrest than at the prison because she was locked in the basement of the building, although the apprehension left after the first couple of meetings.

"I felt safer at South Fork than I feel anywhere else," she said. "I took my children in there with me. In prison they have a pecking order and child molesters are at the bot-

tom. Right next to the bottom are rapists. If anyone would have done something to me or my children, I think the other prisoners would have killed them."

Gray stayed at the prison until 1976, then enrolled at Lewis and Clark College and got a degree in elementary education. During that time, she owned and operated a kindergarten and preschool.

In 1979, Gray appeared before the Board of Ordained Ministries and "they turned me down," she said. "They felt there wasn't a church that was ready for me."

Bishop Jack Tuell disagreed with them and overrode the committee's decision. He appointed her to the Boring church last June.

"I've been very well accepted here," she said. "I consider myself a pastor first, then a woman, I'm not out to prove that I can do a man's job. I'm just trying to do the job the Lord has given me to do."

There were 12 people at her first service; now the congregation is up to 40. And her job is no small task when you consider that Boring United Methodist Church's pastor is a mother of four. Matthew is a freshman at Clackamas Community College, Mark is a high school junior, Marvin is a seventh grader and Melissa is a fourth grader. Don't be too surprised if one or more of them turns out to be a minister as well.

It's been a long time since Elisabeth Gray preached her third grade gospel to that empty congregation in Reedville. Now she has her own; a real one.

But then, it's not really surprising. After all, the ministry is in her blood.