

Preacher ministers to workers idled by oil bust

By **MICHAEL BRICK**
Houston Chronicle

GONZALES, Texas — May-be God knew the price of crude oil would fall so far so fast. Across Texas, drilling rigs would come down. The bust would leave behind disposal wells and empty hotels, ruined roads and men with no place to go.

God was the one, Hollas Hoffman says, who called him out of retirement at the height of the boom, not even two years ago, to take up a new ministry in the oil fields. God sent him to address early morning safety meetings, to hand out his phone number and most of all to lend an ear in times of grief, addiction and loneliness. God told him, hale at the age of 70, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the transient workers of the Eagle Ford Shale.

And God, as layoffs accelerate, has not given any clear order to stop. “The telephone calls have increased,” Hoffman told the *Houston Chronicle*. “As they lose their jobs, we get calls. I get calls from people who just want to talk. You can tell they’re crying. I get calls from wives, I get calls from men. Marriage breakups are fairly common. We’ve had suicidal calls. We just try to respond to whatever they call about.”

From the border to this small town 75 miles east of San Antonio, across the Permian Basin and up through the Panhandle, fading rural churches once hoped to replenish their pews with the arrival of thousands of roughnecks, tool pushers and middle managers, especially those with families in tow. But while some counted an increase in tithing as members leased their land for petroleum extraction, most of the aged congregations gained little in the way of new membership.

“There’s kind of a cultural disconnect between the quote-unquote ‘oil trash’ and the community, the itinerant versus stationary groups,” said Andrew Fiser, an earnest young



AP Photo/Houston Chronicle, Gary Coronado
Hollas Hoffman, third from left, a chaplain, says a prayer with John Salmon, a truck driver with Wrangler Trucking, and his wife Rebecca Salmon, shown to Hoffman’s right, and other family members Feb. 4 in Gonzales, Texas.

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— Rev. Andrew Fiser, United Methodist Church

reverend dispatched to coordinate efforts across South Texas for the United Methodist Church. “We really struggled to find the faith communities and specifically lay people that were able to do that work.”

The failure of those efforts came as little surprise to Hoffman, who spent four decades as the pastor of half a dozen churches in small towns across the state. He knew firsthand not just the limitations of the pulpit, but also the power of ministry and the audacity required.

Though his parents were, by his description, “not Christian,” Hoffman started attending church at the age of 5, when a Sunday school teacher came to fetch him. At first he was confused by talk of the Lord, which he mistook as a reference to the crock jar of pig fat in his grand-

mother’s kitchen, but before long he was singing in the choir. He accepted his savior at age 13. Years of restlessness as a young man led to the righteous path, which eventually led to his retirement career.

Among his qualifications for the ministry, Hoffman counts a gift for easy conversation and the love of his wife, Nelda, who has a better memory for names and other meaningful details. They married as widow and widower. They live in a neighborhood where the streets are named for saints. They wear matching black shirts depicting a derrick and the name of their ministry, Oil Patch Chapel.

“We felt a real need to go out there and we didn’t know exactly why,” Hoffman said. “The churches weren’t reaching them, so we decid-

ed to take the churches to them.”

Formally endorsed by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, their work has drawn enough financial support to provide an annual budget of \$115,000. Across the state, they have recruited about 60 volunteer chaplains, whom they supply with Bibles, business cards, ministry logo shirts and magnetic car signs. Before the industry layoffs began, they commissioned 4-foot by 48-foot banners that say “Welcome Oil Field Workers,” in the hopes that civic leaders might hang them across the highways to foster boom-town goodwill.

Though Hoffman seeks permission from drilling bosses to speak at morning safety meetings, the cards he leaves behind are not primarily intended for managers. Many of those men and women live with their families in comfortable corporate housing. Some of them find churches on their own.

His cards are for the laborers. He encourages them to call in moments of desperation, after accidents and explosions, after bar fights and bouts of boredom, after bad news from home and now, more and more, after layoffs.

“People are distressed, and they don’t feel like they have any hope,” Hoffman said. “We introduce them to Jesus, and that makes a difference in their lives.”

Hoffman likes to call his ministry “a series of interruptions.”

Nothing happens on a set schedule. The men he serves live in trailers far from their families, overworked and overpaid, spending their wages on beer and gouged rent. It can be hard to save for a rainy day when the monthly cost of a trailer with four other men exceeds \$6,000. Fourteen hour shifts leave little time for making contingency plans. And for those who lose their jobs, oil field work comes with no guarantee of severance pay.

Through charitable donations, Hoffman tries to provide a sort of token safety net. Other than refer-

als to financial counseling, he can offer little more than a casserole and perhaps a small grocery store gift card.

But the most important contribution he and his wife make to troubled workers is “their love,” said Rebecca Salmon, whose husband broke his neck driving an oil field truck. “They share their love with you.”

Reaching those workers, especially in times of distress, presents an enduring challenge. One of his volunteer chaplains, Stan Hays, a pipeline construction supervisor, struggled for years to spread a gospel message in the oil fields before signing on with Hoffman.

“The guys I call ‘hard-core criminals,’ out of prison, struggling in their lives, they don’t want to hear it from me,” Hays said. “They think I’m fake.”

Hoffman takes a gentle approach. His advanced age, he says, helps put men at ease. His choice of the title “chaplain” suggests he does not intend to cajole anyone into church attendance.

At a construction site for a disposal facility outside town the other day, Hoffman struck up a conversation with Alan Gao, 31, an operations coordinator for the oil field waste management firm Trisun Energy. They talked about the price of crude. Hoffman said he was planning to attend a speech by the chairman of the Railroad Commission, which regulates the oil industry. Maybe, he suggested, he could return with some insights about business conditions.

After the small talk ran out, Hoffman made a pitch for his ministry.

“When we try to help your workers, or you, we never interfere with their work schedule,” he said. “If you have somebody that’s in distress, they’re probably not going to be as good a worker. So please feel free to call on us. We have people that can be there in 20 minutes if you have a wreck or an explosion.”

Undercover agent takes stand in NY rabbi’s trial

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — When two undercover agents called posing as a brother and sister looking to obtain a divorce from the sister’s unwilling husband, a New York rabbi told them that New Jersey Rabbi Mendel Epstein was a “hired hand” who could be “very helpful” to them.

Epstein “is a hired hand,” Rabbi Martin Wolmark is heard telling the agents in 2013. “Mendel Epstein’s not a bad guy, he’s a good guy. ... He’ll be very helpful.”

Prosecutors played those recordings on Thursday, the second day of trial for Epstein and his three co-defendants: son David Epstein, Jay Goldstein and Binyamin Stimler.

Mendel Epstein is accused of employing a kidnap team to force unwilling Jewish husbands to divorce their wives. The defendants face charges including conspiracy to commit kidnapping and attempted kidnapping stemming from a staged kidnap-

ping in 2013 and three other forced divorces.

Defense attorney Robert Stahl has called Mendel Epstein an advocate for women. He doesn’t dispute that “some laws may have been broken along the way,” but said those didn’t include kidnapping.

The female FBI agent, who worked under the alias Rachel Marconi during the operation, took the stand Thursday and said she got in touch with Mendel Epstein through Wolmark, who said she needed “special rabbis” to get the job done.

Wolmark, who was indicted along with Mendel Epstein, pleaded guilty last month.

The two agents told Wolmark that the sister’s husband in Argentina wouldn’t divorce her, even after they were “shaken down” for more than \$20,000. Wolmark warns the agents that it could be a costly process and recommends Mendel Epstein, according to the recording.

BRIEFLY

Presbyterian church plans dinner, auction

PENDLETON — Pulled pork sandwiches, coleslaw, baked beans and s’mores are on the menu for a fundraising dinner at the First Presbyterian Church of Pendleton.

The Winter Barbecue & Auction is Sunday at 4:30 p.m. in the church’s Rogers Fellowship Hall, 201 S.W. Dorion Ave., Pendleton. The cot is \$10 for adults and \$5 for children. Also, the men’s ensemble will perform during the event.

Money raised will help support the Women’s Annual Retreat, which includes women of all denominations. For more information call 541-276-7681.

Study group delves into Christian book

PENDLETON — A group recently began discussing a book that dissects each phrase of the Lord’s Prayer, using it as a framework for the Christian

life.

Kit Morgan is leading the discussion about “Lord, Teach Us: The Lord’s Prayer & the Christian Life” by Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas. The group met Feb. 19 in Morgan’s home and will continue to meet weekly as they make their way through the book.

For more information about the discussion group, contact Morgan at kit@morganpost.net, 541-969-4972 or Rev. Jim Pierce at preachervet@gmail.com.

New Hope hosts Hour of Power Singing

HERMISTON — A gathering of song will include the singing of hymns accompanied by Louise Sundvall.

The Hour of Power Singing is Sunday, March 1 at 6 p.m. at New Hope Community Church, 1350 S. Highway 395, Hermiston.

Everyone is welcome. For more information, call Doug Fehrenbacher at 541-561-8327.



Adams Community Church <i>Duane Geyer, Pastor</i> 140 N. Main, Adams, OR 566-9457 <u>Worship</u> 9 am	GRACE AND MERCY LUTHERAN CHURCH, ELCA OPEN HEARTS – OPEN DOOR www.graceandmercylutheran.org Sunday Worship 9:00 a.m. 541-289-4535 Dot Hensley, President 164 E. Main St. Hermiston, Oregon 97838	St. Johns Episcopal Church All People Are Welcome <i>Scripture, Tradition and Reason</i> Family service 9am Sunday Gladys Ave & 7th Hermiston Fr. Dan Lediard, Priest. PH: 567-4672	Redeemer Episcopal Church 241 SE Second St. Pendleton (541)276-3809 www.pendletonepiscopal.org Sunday Morning Worship 9:00 a.m. Wednesday Worship Noon Wednesday Evening Prayer and Pot Luck 6:00 p.m. All Are Welcome
Grace Baptist Church 555 SW 11th, Hermiston 567-9497 <i>Nursery provided for all services</i> Sunday School - 9:30 AM Worship - 10:45 AM 6:00 pm Wed Prayer & Worship - 7:00 PM “Proclaiming God’s word, growing in God’s grace”	FIRST CHURCH OF GOD First Service @ 8:30am Second Service @ 10:30am 712 SW 27th Pendleton 541-276-1894 www.fcogpendleton.com	FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH -Presbyterian Church (USA)- 201 SW Dorion Ave. Pendleton Service of Worship - 10:00 am Children’s Sunday School - 10:20 am Fellowship - 11:00 am www.pendletonpresbyterian.com Open Hearted...Open Minded	<i>Come meet Jesus at</i> PENDLETON BAPTIST CHURCH 3202 S.W. Nye Avenue, Pendleton, OR 541-276-7590 Sunday Morning Worship 8:30 & 11:00 AM Sunday Bible Classes 9:45 AM Sunday Youth Group 6:00 PM Awana Kids Club Tuesdays 6:30 - 8:00 PM K - 6th Grade (Sept-May)
FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH <i>Pastor Jon Jensen</i> <i>in Mission for Christ LCMC</i> Bible Study.....9:00 AM Sunday Worship.....10:30 AM Red Lion Hotel (Oregon Trail Room) www.faithpendleton.org	Living Word Christian Center Sunday Worship Service 10:00 AM Wednesday Bible Study 7:00 PM Sharon Miller, Pastor 401 Northgate • Pendleton 278-8082 www.livingwordcc.com	The Salvation Army <i>Center for Worship & Service</i> Sunday Worship Service 9:30 - Sunday School 10:30 - Worship Service Wednesday Bible Study 5:30 Family Fellowship Meal 6:00 Bible Study COME AS YOU ARE 150 SE EMIGRANT (541) 276-3369	Peace Lutheran Church ELCA 210 NW 9th, Pendleton Join us Sundays 9:30 am Sunday Worship 10:30 am Fellowship 11:00 am Sunday School & Adult Class ~Come and be at Peace~ on 1290 KUMA noon each Sunday
Community Presbyterian Church 14 Martin Drive, Umatilla, OR 922-3250 Worship: 10 AM Sunday School at 11:30	Faith Center Church Worshipping God • Loving People 108 S. Main • 276-9569 Sunday School 9:30 am Sunday Worship 10:30 am Sr. Pastor, Ray O’Grady pendletonfaithcenter.org	FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) 215 N Main • Pendleton Ph:541-276-5358 Web: www.fccpendleton.org Join us for 10:40am Sunday Worship with Sunday School at 9:30am. Wednesday Fellowship Meal & Study Groups-Open to All Ages-at 5:15pm. Quality Nursery Care is Offered at No Charge.	New Hope Community Church <i>Ministries for the entire family</i> 1350 S Hwy 395, Hermiston Sunday Worship Services: 9 a.m. & 10:45 a.m. Classes for kids during both! <i>Call 567-8441</i> Servicios en Español
Seventh-Day Adventist Church Saturday Services Pendleton 1401 SW Goodwin Place 276-0882 Sabbath School 9:20 am Worship Service 10:45 am Pilot Rock 104 W. Main Sabbath School 9:30 am Worship Service 11:00 am	<i>a place to belong</i> Pendleton First INVITING ENRICHING INVOLVING EMPOWERING SUNDAY SERVICES AM Celebration-10:00am AM Kids Place -10:00am The Connection--6:00pm Groups for all ages: Adults, Children, Youth, & College Thursdays Celebrate Recovery-6:00pm Celebration Place-6:00pm Other Groups Available Weekly For more info visit WWW.PENDLETONFIRST.COM 1911 SE Court Ave 541-276-6417 Assembly of God Church	First United Methodist Church 352 SE 2nd St., Pendleton, OR Office 276-2616 <i>New Pastor Dr. Jim Pierce</i> Worship Service 9:00 AM Fellowship 10:15 AM Broadcast KUMA 11:00 AM Childcare Available Choir practice Sundays 8:30 AM BAHA’I FAITH “The Unity of All Mankind” Pendleton Baha’i Center at 1015 SE Court Place Devotions Sundays @ 11:00am; Everyone invited! (541) 276-9360 visit us at www.pendletonbahais.org	PILOT ROCK BAPTIST CHURCH 585 SW Birch, Pilot Rock, OR 97868 (541) 443-2500 prbconline.blogspot.com Sunday School: 9:30 am Worship Service: 10:45 am Wednesday Services: Kids’ Club: 6:00 pm Youth Group: 7:00 pm To share your worship times call Amanda Jacobs 541-278-2683