

# Ashland area pastor retires

## Lutheran minister served in Schuylkill for most of career

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ASHLAND — A Lutheran minister's career has come full circle after nearly 40 years of preaching in Schuylkill County.

The Rev. Robert F. Hoenich, pastor of Christ's United Lutheran Church on Airport Road, gave his last sermon Sunday. He is retiring, hoping to spend time traveling, gardening, and with his wife, Nan, and family.

More than 200 people filled the church Sunday morning to be part of the service.

"On April 1, 2001, I began ministry in this congregation," Hoenich told those present. "I have, with God's help and to the best of my abilities, exercised this trust. After prayer and careful consideration, I am now leaving this charge, and publicly state that my tenure as pastor of this congregation ends this day."

One of Hoenich's final pastoral acts was to baptize a new church member: Infant Knloe Marie Heiser, daughter of Sherry Heiser, was baptized in the center aisle with the congregation looking on.

As Hoenich's final service reached its conclusion, he

presented the following items to the congregation: water and baptismal bowl, Pulpit Bible, children's sermon books, chalice and paten, and oil used to anoint in healing.

"It is time for me to go forth, having restored to you the signs of this office, which you presented to me. I ask that you send me forth in your love," Hoenich said to the congregation.

"May God's blessings be with you as you go forth from us to continue the ministry of Christ," the congregation said in unison.

"The Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace," he said, giving the final blessing as pastor, with the congregation responding, "Amen."

Hoenich grew up in Minersville, graduating from Minersville High School in 1965 and going on to attend Penn State Schuylkill campus.

He spent the last two years at Penn State's University Park campus before spending four years at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Part of that instruction, he said, was a year of internship performed at Christ's United Lutheran. It was at a



The Rev. Robert F. Hoenich presents Knloe Marie Heiser, the newest member of Christ's United Lutheran Church, Ashland, during the Sunday morning worship service. The service was Hoenich's last as pastor of the congregation, as he is retiring after nearly 40 years in ministry.

DAVID MCKENNY/SPECIAL PHOTO

time when the church was one of five that merged.

His first call was to a church in the Bangor area. He later went to St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Pine Grove, where he served from June 1980 until March 2001.

"All of our daughters are Pine Grove grads," Hoenich said. "We were always happy to stay in the county. It's a good place."

In April 2001, he returned to Christ's church, which now has a congregation of 350 active adults and 120 children.

"I was able to come back and see everything they have accomplished. This is a wonderful example of what churches can do when they merge," Hoenich said. "They paid off the building a few

years ago and just built an addition. They are a strong congregation."

Hoenich said church life has changed in the 37 years he has been at the pulpit.

"There are lot more expectations of a pastor in terms of being available to people and their needs than ever before," Hoenich said. "People are more open to sharing their problems and troubles with their pastor. The nice thing is that they are opening up to the Lord."

"Even though the world is changing around us, the church seems to be a place for people to find peace in their lives."

Hoenich said his favorite part of his calling is people invited him into their lives. "They have invited me to

walk with them and the paths we've shared have been the most humbling and satisfying," he said.

Hoenich said although officiating at funerals is never easy — he estimates doing almost 700 in his career — the most difficult part for him was conflict and disagreement within a church.

"People sometimes have a difficult time with change, not being able to adapt to something new," he said. "Even new music or a new style of ministry can bring conflict with the change."

Although he is retiring and settling in Washington Township, Hoenich said his family will remain an active part of the church.

"We love this area. The county is a good place and we

have been happy to have been able to be close to our family for the last 30 years," he said. "I have coal dust in my blood. Most of us who were born and raised here do."

"It's hard to look back at this point, but I will. I often think I will write a book about my wonderful experiences at some point."

At the conclusion of his final service, Hoenich was hugged and kissed by everyone who participated in the service in the sanctuary. He later greeted everyone at a gathering in the church hall.

The congregation held a farewell dinner for Hoenich last weekend at Fountain Springs Country Inn.

A supply pastor will serve Christ's United Lutheran until a new pastor is found.