

# PLACING FAITH IN RURAL RESTORATION

Supporters of historic country church near Buxton work toward its renewal



Photos by Eric Hylden / Grand Forks Herald

Bobbi Hepper-Olson, a Buxton architect is part of a group working to save Grue Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, near Buxton.



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## GRAND FORKS HERALD BUXTON, N.D.

Loyal parishioners have extinguished a plan to burn down Grue Lutheran Church. Instead, they plan to turn it into a cultural center.

Descendants of Grue Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, which was built in 1891, want to renovate the building into a cultural center that can be used to host events, including concerts and art shows, as well as occasional services.

Besides the sanctuary, the church – seven miles northeast of Buxton – has a meeting room on the first floor and a basement that was added in 1932.

Original plans were to burn the building, which has been vacant since spring 2020 when services were suspended because of dwindling membership. However, former church members and families of those buried in the cemetery decided to instead restore the church. In September 2020, they transferred the building and grounds to the historic nonprofit Buxton in Bloom organization.

Bobbi Hepper-Olson, a Buxton architect; Nancy Friese, who divides her time between a Buxton farm and Rhode Island, where she is an art professor; and her sister Sally Hoff,

a former Grand Forks resident who lives in Fort Collins, Colo., are part of the group working to save the Lutheran country church.

Hepper-Olson, Hoff, Friese and the remaining members of the congregation want to restore the church building, which would include tearing off the faux wood paneling on the walls surrounding the altar, putting in new restrooms and re-roofing the church. Besides those repairs and repainting the church's interior and exterior, the building is in good condition and aesthetically beautiful, featuring embossed tin walls, a large painting on the altar and an ornate altar rail.

"It still is in remarkably good shape," Hepper-Olson said. "Our goal is for the church to still be used for church functions, spiritual functions and family gatherings.

When the church was built, it was the community hub."

Meanwhile, several members of her husband's family are buried in the church cemetery.

Friese and Hoff feel a strong connection to the church because their father, John Friese, is buried there in one of six Grue Lutheran Cemetery plots purchased by their mother, Laura Odegard Friese.

Hoff's grandmother, Laura Odegard Friese, purchased the burial plots because her five sons and their brother-in-law were serving in World War II, and she was convinced none would return alive, Hoff said.

However, they did, so the plots weren't used until they died many years later.

Three of the Friese brothers, including Hoff's father, are buried in the cemetery. The other three men are buried in Ohio, but have markers in the Grue Cemetery noting the Ohio location.

Mancur Olson, a renowned economist, also is buried in the Grue Cemetery, and the group working to save the church hopes to raise \$5,000 to pay for a historical marker that would be erected next to his grave.

A board that has been formed to oversee fundraising for the Grue Lutheran Church restoration has a goal of \$250,000. Meanwhile, the board hopes to hold fundraising events on the church grounds this summer.

For more information about Grue Lutheran Church and cemetery visit <https://ca.gofundme.com/f/gruechurch-project>.