

and move into a dirty old facility that had recently been damaged by a fire, Bishop says. But they did, and now they're ecstatic that the church has a means by which to open their doors to the community. Three months after the community center opened, about 30 non-parishioners attend the bluegrass sessions and 12 attend exercise classes.

The transformation came with years of sacrifice. When Jenny Colson originally saw the old building her church had acquired, her first thoughts weren't positive.

"The walls were covered in that black, black sooty dirt that gets under your fingernails," says the church pianist. Even though other members saw potential in the old building — with 3 1/2 acres of property vs. 3/4 acre at the old lot — "I didn't see it," Colson admits.

Yet, Colson's family and others joined in the Saturday ritual of construction work provided by the men, lunches provided by the women. For eight years.

For Ron Milligan, church historian and one of the construction leaders, the project was a labor of love. Although he now lives in Andersonville, Milligan makes regular 30-minute trips to serve and attend his home church — located in the school he attended as a child. He remembers eating in the cafeteria, which is now the church fellowship hall. When he worships, he sits in the place where he sat as a student, looking out the same window where the trees have greatly matured in the past 50 years.

At least two newcomers have already been drawn into the church through the community center. Doug Davis and his wife had attended different churches over the years, but not regularly.

When Davis learned of the church's plans to begin a community center, "something clicked," he says. Davis not only became vice chair of the community center's board, but also a regular participant at worship and Bible study.

"I don't know if you can describe that," says Davis, explaining why he felt led to become part of the church. "It's a feeling of the Lord saying, 'Come on in.'"

Now that most work on the building is complete — transforming it into a homey place with sun-lit windows and quilts on the bathroom walls — the congregation is focusing on developing the property.

A survey of 2,900 residents earlier this year showed that the community really wanted a walking track. They're not only getting the track, but the community center board has received \$1,500 from Knox Co. Parks and Recreation and \$1,000 from St. Mary's Medical Center to build a softball field and playground. Organizers also have plans for after-school care and senior-citizen group meetings, Bishop says.

"We're so excited about this," says the pastor, a former nurse who entered the ministry in 1997.

"These people worked hard toward a goal of opening their doors to the community. And they're doing it. It's amazing how God does stuff." ■

denominations — grapple with declining membership that soon could cost Protestantism its status as the nation's top religious movement. Some United Methodists see an opportunity for the denomination in this election.

"It certainly says that we are a very big tent, that Edwards and Cheney and Bush all could be thought of as Methodists," says the Rev. David F. McAllister-Wilson, president of the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington. "We'd like to believe that since Methodists have people who have a wide variety of political persuasions, that means we can bring lots of voices to the same table and talk about what God requires for the 21st century."

The church's role in the election points to a shift in American politics, as a denomination that is seen as more progressive than the evangelical right assumes a key spot in Washington, says Mike McCurry, a Kerry campaign senior adviser and former press secretary in the Clinton administration. McCurry also served as a delegate last spring to General Conference, the United Methodist Church's top legislative assembly.

"For some time, the Democratic Party has sort of ceded the question of faith and politics to the evangelical right," he says, in an interview with United Methodist News Service. "What's happening in this campaign is the progressive faith community has found its voice again."

But the Rev. James V. Heidinger II, chairman of the Association for Church Renewal, a fellowship of evangelicals within the mainline Protestant denominations of North America, believes the church's role merely illustrates the diversity of the so-called religious right.

"I think the whole term 'the religious right' ... is an imprecise term," says Heidinger, who is also president of Good News, an unofficial and nonpartisan United Methodist evangelical group. "You have to say a whole lot more than just sling around the phrase 'the religious right' to really know just who it is that you're speaking about, because there are many evangelicals in all the mainline churches that cover a broad continuum of social-political positions."

Bush has talked of his faith ever since naming Jesus as his favorite political philosopher during the 2000 presidential race. He justified the war in Iraq in his address to the Republican National Convention this year by saying, "Freedom is not America's gift to the world, it is the Almighty God's gift to every man and woman in this world." He supports a constitutional ban on gay marriage but said in his State of the Union address, "The same moral tradition that defines marriage also teaches that each individual has dignity and value in God's sight."

Bob Woodward of The Washington Post quotes Bush in his book *Plan of Attack* as saying that he prayed "for the strength to do the Lord's will" in Iraq.

"His faith is authentic," Heidinger tells UMNS. "He not only talks about it, he tries to live it."

Cheney is much more private with his faith. Nonetheless, the Bush campaign recognizes how important religious voters will be in this close election, and it has designated a team for religious outreach, spokeswoman Sharon Castillo says.

"We've started earlier and are devoting more resources," she says.

But Bush declined to speak last spring at General Conference, the United Methodist legislative assembly held every four years. Before then, efforts to arrange a meeting with the president and United Methodist bishops broke down after some bishops spoke out against the president on the war in Iraq.

"War is, for us, not the first step you take to get to peace," argued Bishop Melvin Talbert, then-ecumenical officer for the United Methodist Council of Bishops, during a press conference at General Conference. "It's the

last resort. It seems the commitment to the common good has dropped off the radar screen for this administration."

Bush also has drawn criticism for his faith-driven leadership. "We did not elect him as the priest of the nation," complained Bishop McKinley Young of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, speaking at the same press conference.

However, Clayton Childers of the denomination's Board of Church and Society, its social justice arm, believes Bush's faith should be part of his leadership.

"I'm proud he's not ashamed of his faith," he says. "For me, faith also applies to how we live our lives, and the choices we make about hunger and poverty and homelessness, inadequate health care, how we try to be peacemakers in the world. ... I wish the government would step up to those challenges."

Sen. John Kerry, a Catholic, famously attacked Bush's faith-driven leadership in his address to the summer's Democratic National Convention by saying, "I don't want to claim that God is on our side. As Abraham Lincoln told us, I want to pray humbly that we are on God's side."

Nonetheless, the campaign also has appointed a team to religious outreach that is perhaps the first of its kind for Democrats, McCurry says. "It's the largest effort that we Democrats have ever undertaken."

Kerry running mate Edwards may not talk as often of his faith, but it played a role in his decision to enter politics in 1998, says the Rev. Roger Elliott, pastor of the 3,600-member Edenton Street United Methodist Church in Raleigh, N.C., where the senator and his wife attend services. Edwards grew up attending church, but the 1996 death of his son in a car accident reinvigorated his faith, and he served on his congregation's administrative board before his campaign for the Senate, Elliott says.

"He met with me several times before he ran for the Senate, just to bounce some possibilities off of me like how does this relate to the Christian faith," he says.

The candidates' religious beliefs will remain up for debate as long as faith-based issues such as the war and gay marriage are in the news. Some surveys show regular churchgoers tend to vote Republican, but Shaun Casey, assistant professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, says many of those votes still are up for grabs. He says some estimates are that 8 percent of Catholics and 8 percent of white evangelicals remain undecided.

"Those are big chunks of the electorate," he says. "The key is going to be undecided religious voters, particularly in these swing states they keep talking about. The ticket that is most successful in swinging those demographics may well win the election." ■

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Igniting Ministry training goes online

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (UMNS) — Basic training in the United Methodist Church's welcoming and television ministry will become accessible to nearly every congregation with the launch of a new online course. The course, "Igniting Ministry 101," began this month and will continue through Nov. 30. It is being offered by United Methodist Communications, which manages the Igniting Ministry program. The registration fee is \$12 per student, and enrollment is open at <http://www.training.umc.org>. As enrollees work through the course's four modules at their own pace, they will learn about how TV advertising can benefit their congregations and brush up on hospitality skills. ■