



Built by German settlers in 1876, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Dessau, 13300 Dessau Road, is the last standing structure from the town

of Dessau. With its membership lagging, the congregation voted to close the church. The last services will be today at 3 p.m.

Staff photos by Larry Kolvoord

Church's bells to toll no more



at Dessau Lutheran since it opened church has 30 members, only half of

■ Down to 30 members, Dessau Lutheran closes after 118 years

By Chuck Lindell
American-Statesman Staff

It is the classic little white church on a hill, and its bell still tolls when a congregation member dies.

But after today, the 118-year-old Evangelical Lutheran Church of Dessau will cease to exist. Although the wood-frame building will continue standing, it will be a church without a congregation — history without an audience.

Members, down to a dwindling few, voted in early December to

close Dessau Lutheran after a yearlong fight to find the money and the membership to survive.

"I'm too upset over it to talk," said member Dorothy Cavitt, 71. "I'm going to miss it too much."

In closing services today at 3 p.m., the church at 13300 Dessau Road will be deeded over to the Southwestern Texas Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The doors will be locked and the windows shuttered.

"This church has meant just about everything to me," said Gordon Kettman, 42, a member for five years. "Everybody's been like family here."

Only five years ago, Dessau Lutheran had 130 members. Then a charismatic pastor departed, leaving a void in leadership and mo-

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118-year-old Dessau church closing doors

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mentum that part-time pastors who followed couldn't fill. Social pressures finished the church off, Kettelman said.

"I think it's just a sign of the times," he said. "The younger generation, it seems, doesn't have time to go to church. Or they want a bigger church so they can put their children in day care. Or they don't get involved."

In a small congregation, involvement equals survival. Today, the church is supported by 30 members, only half of whom attend regularly.

"Closing the church was an inevitable decision," Davis said. "Sad but inevitable."

Dessau Lutheran is the last remaining structure from the town of Dessau, founded in the 1850s about 12 miles north of Austin and named for Dessau, Germany — hometown to one of the settlers.

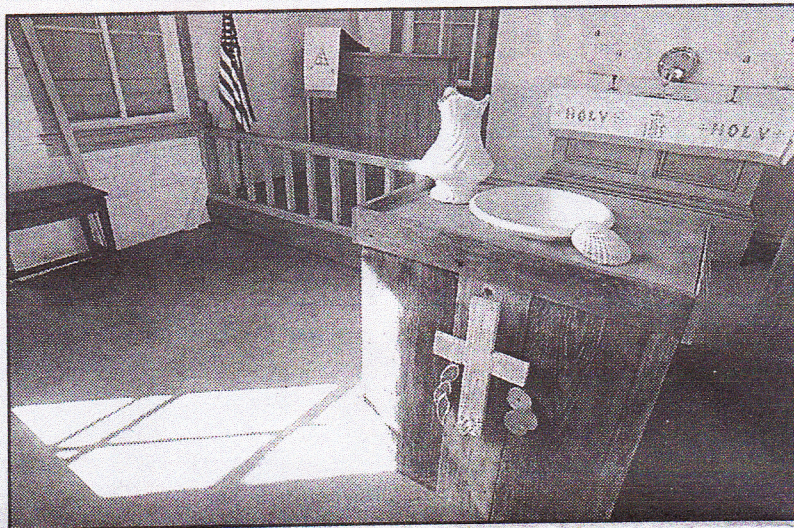
Around 1876, members of the German immigrant community pooled their resources and built the church that stands today. The pews, altar and pulpit are all original, said Dotty Davis, 58, who has helped compile the church's history. A steeple, with its tolling bell, was added later.

Harvey Schoen, 69, was baptized in the Dessau church long before subdivisions changed the landscape. When he was growing up in the 1920s and '30s, the view from the hilltop church showed family farms, livestock and little else.

"This is home for me," Schoen said. "My parents are buried in the cemetery out front (of the church). My grandparents are buried here. My great-grandfather kept books here — it was all in German at that time."

Eventually, English services replaced German rites as later generations learned the language.

Like similar churches throughout Central Texas, Dessau Luther-



Staff photo by Larry Kolvoord

Services have been led from Dessau Lutheran's pulpit and altar since the church opened in 1876. The church's last services will be today at 3 p.m.



Staff graphics

an canceled all German services in the early 1940s. It was a pro-America move to distance churchgoers from Adolf Hitler's Germany. It also was practical — during World War II, those who spoke with a German accent had to prove their patriotism.

Dessau Lutheran has kept many of the homey, small-church touches that visitors would consider quaint but members barely notice.

There is no air conditioning, and on hot days the congregation breaks out decades-old hand fans, still embossed with funeral home logos.

Until two years ago, a wood

stove provided heat. A howling north wind would force the smoke back inside, providing a literal Ash Wednesday lesson one year.

Bees, hornets and wasps have nested in the old building's nooks for as long as anybody can remember.

"They would land on you, but they never stung anybody," Kettelman said. "One would land, and everybody would grit their teeth and say, 'Well, he's going to get it.' But they never stung, and it happened every Sunday."

In deeding Dessau over to the synod, church leaders hope it will continue serving area Lutherans as an extension of the Austin-based Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest.

The seminary is developing a proposal for the synod, director August Wenzel said.

"It would be our plan to have a regular worship life established, but we don't know what that means yet," he said. "It's our intention to utilize the property for the development of student housing and a worshipping community."

Regardless of Dessau Lutheran's fate, there will be no more chili cookoffs after the children's Christmas pageant, no more barbecues on the huge pit donated by the Pflugerville Volunteer Fire Department.

"It's a closing of an era," Davis said. "I guess you can say it's closing a chapter of our lives."