

Single seniors join Bangor-area Active Agers

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

One recent morning in a sunny clearing near the start of the Orono Bog Boardwalk in the Bangor City Forest, about a dozen older men and women were working through the relaxed but disciplined motions of a simple tai chi routine. A slow punch to the front, a slow step to the side, jaw soft, eyes front. Breathe, breathe. Quiet mind. Birdsong and the scent of warm pine needles filled the air.

George Trueman, 73 of Dixmont watched the tai chi group without participating. But when instructor Erin Coltvet of the Eastern Area Agency on Aging brought the exercise to a close, Trueman stepped forward to join the others for a guided walk along the board-

walk. It was his first visit to the popular 1-mile boardwalk, which passes through an expansive peat bog environment.

Widowed since his wife died last October, Trueman has been meeting for the past couple of months with a new Eastern Area Agency on Aging group called Active Agers. He regularly joins the group at Dysart's Broadway Restaurant in Bangor for Saturday breakfast and for other local activities, such as a recent brown bag lunch at Bangor's Waterfront Park and the bog boardwalk tour in the city forest.

"It's something to do," he said. "I'm not one to just sit around."

Active Agers was established to promote socialization and physical activity among Bangor-area adults age 50 and over, especially but not

exclusively those without spouses or partners. The group has attracted about 20 participants so far.

"We have people whose spouses or partners are just less active than they are," Coltvet said.

Others are caring for loved ones who are severely debilitated physically or cognitively and just need a break, she said. Some have been single for a long time and others, such as Trueman, are coping with a more recent loss.

"People tell us weekends are tough," Coltvet said.

The agency's first effort, to organize hobby clubs and card games, fell through when no one showed up.

"We learned people really want to get out and do something," she said.

See Active, Page C2



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Don Curtis (right) and Pat Smith stop to take a picture of a plant during their recent guided tour of the Orono Bog Boardwalk with the Eastern Area Agency on Aging group Active Agers.

Living their faith

Endangered Maine 'church ladies' support communities

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

The front door of the handsome Franklin Street United Methodist Church in Bucksport stood wide open to the warm September sunshine on a recent Friday morning. Inside, the sound of laughter and a bustle of activity came from the kitchen on the first floor, where a group of six women were tying on colorful aprons, setting out ingredients and selecting mixing bowls, pie pans and utensils from the big wooden cabinets.

Members of the church's Women's Society for Christian Service gathered that morning to bake pies — 16 of them, for a bake sale the next day at the local hardware store. At \$10 per pie, plus a plethora of other contributed goodies such as fudge, cookies, baked beans and yeast rolls, the group hoped to clear about \$400 at the sale, one of three such events it schedules each year.

"All I have to do is make a phone call asking people to make things, and I get a whole team working for me," 69-year-old Chris Petravicz, president of the women's group, said.

The money the group raises throughout the year is distributed to various local funds and causes, including \$600 to the church itself, a \$100 college scholarship for a graduating high school senior, shoe vouchers for children in low-income families, support for the nearby H.O.M.E. cooperative and services for migrant workers harvesting the blueberry crop in the Down East region.

In addition to baking for the scheduled fundraisers, the ladies of the church also prepare food for funeral receptions, the after-church coffee hour and other gatherings hosted in the fellowship hall and in the larger community. It's one way the church supports itself and reaches out to the larger community of Bucksport and surrounding towns.

A mission of service and leadership for women

According to 2010 census data, Maine is the "least churched" state in the country, the only one in which less than 30 percent of the population belongs to a religious denomination or independent Christian church. A function in part of the state's declining overall population, particularly in rural areas, the trend is reflected in smaller, older congrega-



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Georgia Smart (from left), Ramona Wade, Rose Krienke and Rita Clair, members of the Women's Society for Christian Service, make pies to sell at their weekly bake sale in the kitchen of the Franklin Street United Methodist Church in Bucksport last week.

tions and the closure of many small churches statewide. Although the incidence is not formally tracked, the shift is seen in the makeup of traditional church-based ladies aid groups as well, as younger women increasingly hold down full-time jobs or pursue non-church options for volunteer service and leadership in their communities.

"A generation ago, women typically didn't work outside the home," said Glenn Miller of Bangor, a longtime professor of church history who taught for many years at Bangor Theological Seminary and other institutions. "These women's groups filled a real need for socialization and education, as well as providing opportunities for leadership and intervention in the community."

Now, he said, women have many other opportunities to connect outside the home, and the institution of the ladies aid group is fading fast.

At the Franklin Street church, most members of the women's group are in their 60s and 70s, Petravicz said, and membership has been dropping off as fewer families participate in church life.

Still, she said, "We're a very close-knit church family. We are a welcoming congregation and focused on serving the needs of the entire community."

Just across the river at the

Sandy Point Congregational Church, the Ladies Aid Society just marked its 80th year of service in formal affiliation with the church.

President Sara Bradford, 80, said the group is growing older and smaller with the passage of time.

The group's three traditional annual major fundraisers — the Summer Fair, the Harvest Supper and the Christmas Bazaar — have dropped to just one.

"It was just getting to be too much for our members," Bradford said.

Like many ladies aid groups, Bradford said, the Sandy Point group got its start during the Civil War, sewing and knitting for Union troops and supporting needy families left behind in Maine with food, clothing, nursing care and other interventions. When the war ended, the group stayed active, eventually affiliated with the church and continues, to this day, to serve the larger community.

These days, the Sandy Point Ladies Aid helps pay to heat and maintain the historic clapboard church and donates modestly to other local organizations, such as the community club, the cemetery association and the American Legion. It also provides two scholarships for college-bound high school seniors, supports local food pantries, provisions the church kitchen with basic supplies and provides greeting

cards and flowers for community members who are ill or grieving the death of a loved one.

"In Maine, there's a strong tradition of pulling together when someone is in need," Bradford said. "If it's not the family, it will be neighbors and friends who look after them."

But in Sandy Point, she said, that tradition is imperilled by the dwindling ranks of the Ladies Aid.

The group has already opened membership to the community at large, she said, including members of other churches and denominations, summer residents and even a few men who have been made "honorary" members of the group. Still, participation is stagnant. Though there are more than 30 names on the roster, far fewer show up regularly for monthly meetings and special events. While there's no set number required for the group to stay active and effective, Bradford said, what is needed is an infusion of new members with energy and fresh ideas.

"We'd really like to see some younger women join," she said. "But the whole culture has shifted."

In addition to the general decline in church membership and the expanded role of women in the workplace, she noted, it's no longer the norm for multiple generations of a

See Ladies, Page C2

Four ways to be sure it's fall

This week, without fanfare, summer slipped into fall. Judging by the weather, it would be hard to notice.

September so far has felt like a leisurely extension of our balmy summer. Though I worry about the implications of this warming trend, I must admit I'm not missing the garden-killing frosts or sharp-edged evening temperatures I associate with the onset of autumn in Maine.

But even without consulting a calendar, there's no doubt that the season has changed. Here are a few ways I can tell.

Drivewayhenge: At about 6:30 Thursday morning, the sun rose directly at the end of our long, straight driveway. If there weren't so

many leaves still on the trees across the road, it would have shot its celestial first light right up the hill to the turnaround in the doorway. This excellent phenomenon happens approximately once each spring and each fall, pretty much coinciding with the dates of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. An observant friend aptly named it "Drivewayhenge," conferring a bit of mystery and no small amount of self-importance on our otherwise unassuming New England farmhouse.

This year, the autumnal equinox — the moment at which the plane of the earth's equator passed through the center of the sun — occurred at 10:21 a.m. on Thursday, officially moving us from summer into fall.

2016 Summer Swim Challenge: Every single day since the summer solstice occurred on June 20, Douglas and I have taken at least a short swim in natural water — full immersion, no artificial pools. This annual "summer swim challenge" is a small and somewhat pointless goal we set for ourselves, in company with a small cadre of friends and relations. Hard to say just why it pleases us so, but it does.

This year has been pretty easy, what with long stretches of warm days and little rain. The challenge comes in when the weather is bad or the tide in the Penobscot River is way out on the clam flats or we have competing priorities or we just don't feel like pulling on our still-damp swimsuits and getting wet again. The daily swim must still take place or we lose our "perfect" status in the challenge. The 2016 SSC encompassed 95 consecutive days, if you include the days of the solstice and the equinox, when summer officially started and ended. Yes, we're perfect! Also, we're done.

See Haskell, Page C2



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