

COMMUNITY LIFE

THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 1995

Pastor breathes new life into church

■ The Rev. Mark Sommers has breathed new life into the North Farmington Community Church. Now he hopes others will join him.

By BETH SUNDRLA JACIMAN
STAFF WRITER



It was a grim start. A newly divorced pastor, involved in a custody battle with his wife over their young daughter, the Rev. Mark Sommers

came to lead a Sunday morning service at North Farmington Community Church in June of 1992. There he found a congregation of just 21 people, all over the age of 70.

Sommers, 37, found himself taking over a church that had dwindled from a time of rapid growth in the '60s and '70s to one on the brink of extinction.

Up until that time he had been working as a pastor at Redford Baptist Church at Seven Mile and Grand River. He and his wife were in a serious car accident in which they were hit head-on by a drunken driver. He says that after the accident his wife's personality changed overnight. Within six months there was a divorce. After a lengthy custody battle, joint custody was awarded, with the caveat that Sommers would stay in the Detroit area.

"That's like death to a minister," Sommers said. Status as a minister is determined by the size of the church, and it means going from church to church to move up the ladder. He also had been considering a position as a 700-member church outside of Albany, N.Y.

The church in Redford was supportive. "In seven years there I had walked a lot of people through a lot of things. I really sensed the church



SHARON LEMIS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Church community: North Farmington Community Church is attracting new members and keeping the old. Left to right are Roger Crownover, of Novi, member since 1992; Beth Smith, of Farmington Hills, member since 1987; Chuck Tanton, of Farmington Hills, original member; Karen Liebgott, of Bloomfield Township, member since 1994, and the Rev. Mark Sommers.

was there for me. A lot of churches can't accept divorce," he said.

Then came the call from North Farmington Community Church. The Redford church's leaders decided to help after the people at North Farmington gave up control. "Like a Chapter 11," Sommers said. The leaders at Redford Baptist became the governing body of the church, and had a "very deliberate vision."

The church is still governed from the outside but will eventually become self-governed.

To Sommers, his first service at North Farmington, in which a man with an oxygen mask sat in the back row, was very symbolic of the church and his life at that time.

But, some of Sommers' changes have pumped a renewed faith into the church. He has new staff members, new programs, and now there are around 85 members.

He talks of creative and uplifting worship, high-quality children's programs and small-group meetings for adults. "I have been able to

hire exceptional staff. If you want to build and draw people you have to have strong people here," he said.

One difference was changing the name from North Farmington Baptist to North Farmington Community Church, but it's still a member of the American Baptist Churches.

Even though the American Baptist Churches are more forward thinking than many people think,"

See PASTOR, 14A

There's no place like home school

Very little in my childhood would have indicated that I would one day become a renegade.

Even up to a couple years ago, I would have laughed at the suggestion that I might one day choose to home-school my children. Yet, there I sit every morning at my kitchen table teaching the three R's to my oldest daughter.

There is no easy way to express in a few paragraphs what was a gradual decision that was years in the making. I don't necessarily believe that home-schooling is right for everybody or that public education is inherently "bad."

I do, however, believe that there are definite advantages to home-schooling and that my moral and religious views, although not radical in the eyes of most people, do prevent me from sending any of my children to public schools.

One of the greatest advantages of teaching my children at home is that I can teach everything. I do not have to censor any talk of God or Christianity, or any politically incorrect subject or view. I often wonder as to the accuracy of the U.S. history being taught to our kids when our teachers cannot discuss the significant role that God and Christianity played, and continue to play, in the shaping of this country's history.

Religion is a large part of this country's history and yet it is "off limits" in our schools. With religion being censored in our schools (along with pictures of Jesus, "Christmas" vacation, or copies of the Ten Commandments), most children are surely at a loss to explain why the Ten Commandments are engraved in marble in the Supreme Court, why "In God We Trust" appears on all our money, or why our Founding Fathers

See HOME, 14A

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