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Residents struggled to save victims of crash



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## God's rangers

Kevin and Pam McMillan came from America's national parks, where they were rangers, to begin new lives as the pastoral team at a Belgium church



New pastor Kevin McMillan and his wife Pam stood by the sign of their new church in Belgium. Kevin was a law-enforcement ranger at Yosemite National Park in California. Pam is coordinator of the national park system's critical response team. Photo by Sam Arendt

By CAROL POMEDAY  
Ozaukee Press staff  
Posted 11-30-06

The new pastoral team at Alliance Community Bible Church in Belgium is as much at home in the wilderness as in a church, maybe more so.

While Kevin McMillan is the official pastor, his wife Pam is very much a part of the ministry.

Kevin, who at 6-feet, 5-inches towers over his wife and almost everybody else, retired Sept. 30 after 21 years as a law-enforcement ranger, the past 16 years at Yosemite National Park in California. This is his first job in his new career.

Pam is coordinator of the federal park system's critical incident stress management team, which provides support to rangers and their families during emergencies, such as wildfires, hurricanes, accidents, homicides and suicides. She is always on call, just as a pastor, she said.

Pam will not be a typical pastor's wife who coordinates women's activities and social service projects. Her focus will be pastoral counseling and youth ministry.

"We're a team. She's very much a part of the ministry here," Kevin said.

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Pam said, "I asked the elders, 'What's your definition of a pastor's wife because I may not fit that role.'"

How the couple, who both have master's degrees in ministry, came to oversee a congregation of 70 people in Belgium instead of a forest filled with bear, moose, elk and millions of tourists is a lesson in how God works.

In becoming park rangers, both fulfilled a desire they have had since they were children and met their first ranger on family vacations to national forests.

Kevin grew up in California, but Pam grew up on an island in Hawaii that had no national forests. A visit to Rocky Mountain National Park convinced her she wanted to be a ranger.

The couple met in 1982 while serving as seasonal rangers at Crater Lake National Park in Oregon

Both started as naturalists leading hikes. Kevin went into law enforcement and Pam became a firefighter with the helicopter team, who would be airlifted into wildfires.

She became involved with crisis management in an effort to help her husband, who was a member of the team but was having problems dealing with a case.

Kevin was sent to help the family and colleagues of a law-enforcement ranger who was shot and killed in an ambush in Blue Ridge National Parkway in North Carolina.

"The man was murdered responding to a call that someone was shooting at motorists. When he pulled up, he was shot," Kevin said. "I saw so many similarities. He was a strong Christian man about my age. I was having passion fatigue. Anybody who ministers to people has to be very careful about becoming wounded themselves."

Pam said she felt helpless and frustrated when her husband called home and she didn't know to help him.

"I'm in California and he's in North Carolina. Every night we would talk, I knew something was going on with my husband, but I had no ability to know how to help him," she said. "He was going through something I didn't understand, so I decided to go through the training."

She became so adept at organizing the team and helping members when they became too emotionally involved that the coordinator position was created for her. It allows her to live anywhere.

Kevin is still a bit amazed that he's a pastor rather than a park ranger.

In 1995, after attending a Promise Keepers convention in Los Angeles, Kevin started working with troubled teenagers in his church and became the volunteer youth pastor.

"It started with three high school kids. I would hang out with them and we started doing Bible studies and youth services," he said. "It grew to 40 kids and it was taking over my life. When you pray with kids, they tell the Lord their stuff and it breaks your heart."

The McMillans became legal guardians for a teenager whose mother is a drug addict. She is now attending college in California studying to be a psychologist.

"We call her our rent-to-own daughter," Kevin said. "In some ways becoming a father is even more amazing than becoming a pastor. I didn't think I would become a father and feel the pain and joy of that."

However, the combination of the teenagers' needs and his job caused considerable stress. He couldn't do them both, he reasoned, and decided to give up his job as youth pastor.

"My wife — who always seems to be a step ahead of me, as most wives are — said, 'I agree you can't do both, but you have to quit the park ranger job and devote time to the church stuff.'"

He didn't agree.

"I wanted to be a park ranger all my life. My passion and training was as a park ranger, and the church stuff was getting in the way," he said.

"One day, I was taking a walk through Yosemite, praying about what I should talk to the kids about that Sunday. God often speaks to us in thoughts, and he gave me a picture of me standing in front of the kids in church telling them God was calling me to be a pastor. It was real clear and so emotional. I felt overwhelmed by his presence."

The couple decided to study for the ministry together. For five years, they

spent their vacations taking classes at Simpson University in Redding, Calif., earning their degrees in April 2005.

"The Lord has blessed us with this incredible marriage that's very strong. It's a tool God wants us to use in our ministry," Pam said.

Her husband has a gift for preaching and engaging people, she said.

"He has a gift of being able to take the word and feed it to people in a way it can be consumed easily and applied," she said. "He has a lot of compassion and people are drawn to him. He's a real person. What you see is what you get. There are no big mysteries."

Pastoral counseling will offer her a spiritual dimension she cannot always use as a counselor with the park service.

"We're not allowed to bring in God unless the person does," Pam said. "We can only suggest that they see a minister."

That was frustrating, especially after his decision to become a minister, Kevin said.

"I desperately wanted to pray for and with people and I couldn't," he said. "That's when I knew God was leading us somewhere else."

Kevin, 48, planned to retire at age 50 and become a pastor. However, the park service determined he wouldn't be eligible for retirement until he was 58.

He decided 10 years was too long to wait to do God's work. The timing was right for the Alliance Bible position. The church's first pastor, the Rev. Philip Shrank, had retired in March after 10 years of building the church.

The couple interviewed for the position in May on their way to Lambeau Field in Green Bay, where Pam was running a marathon. She helped her husband train for a marathon last year and decided she wanted to run this year. She picked one at Lambeau Field because her husband is a longtime Packers fan.

"I remember getting in the car (after the interview) and saying, 'This is the place. They have a sense of humor here. They get my jokes,'" Kevin said.

The couple later learned the trustees believed he was the right person for their church but wanted to go through the process and interview other candidates.

The new pastor said he wants to reach out to people who don't belong to a church and help the church find its niche in the community.

"When people come into our church, I want them to feel welcome," Kevin said. "A trucker should be able to run into the church in whatever he's wearing and not feel he doesn't belong."

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