

## Hymn of the hills

UNIONTOWN, KENTUCKY | 1989

**T**here was no singing as the organist at the United Methodist Church played Mark Hedges' favorite hymn yesterday morning.

Just last Sunday, Hedges had requested the hymn, had led the congregation in singing it at the regular morning service. But nobody sang along with the organ music yesterday. Hedges wasn't there to lead them. And nobody felt much like a song, besides.

Hedges, one of 10 coal miners killed Wednesday morning in an explosion at the Pyro Mining Co.



mine in Webster County, was the first to be buried. His funeral yesterday morning at the simple brick church he loved was attended by dozens of miners.

Altogether, more than 140 people packed the little church in Uniontown, a mining community of 1,250 people on the Ohio River at the edge of Kentucky's western coalfields.

Some members of the overflow congregation sat in folding metal chairs alongside the pews or stood in the back of the church. The front doors were left open so even more mourners could stand outside on the steps looking in.

Most Uniontown residents' lives are rooted inextricably in mining, and an accident such as the one Wednesday reinforces the kinship they feel, said the Rev. Jean Watkins of the Methodist church. "It's had a heavy impact on this

community," said the Rev. Henry Frantz of St. Agnes Catholic Church in Uniontown.

A memorial service for all the dead miners was planned for 7 p.m. yesterday at Union County High School. Their funerals this weekend, however, will be scattered throughout a handful of counties in Western Kentucky.

Yesterday morning's service for Hedges, 31, attended by a representative of Gov. Wallace Wilkinson's office, officially started the long mourning process.

Many Uniontown residents walked to the church under a steely sky.

At 10:15 a.m., the coffin was rolled down the aisle. Hedges's two young daughters, Jona and Chasity, and his wife, Ruthie, wept softly in a pew near the altar.

The Rev. Beau Watkins began the service, saying, "I feel like many of you. I don't want to be here. I don't want to be doing this."

The congregation recited, "The Lord is my shepherd." Then Watkins' wife, the Rev. Jean Watkins, spoke softly of Hedges as "a brother, an uncle and a son beyond comparison."

Those sitting quietly in attendance remembered Hedges in many other ways:

To Rick Hetric, a fellow miner, Hedges was "a godly man, a churchgoing man." To others, he was the church's Sunday school teacher. Still others had sat in the church on Father's Day, when Hedges filled in at the pulpit for Mrs. Watkins, who was out of town.

Hedges spent much of his spare time helping out at the church. He mowed the lawn whenever his turn came up and attended the Sunday morning service as often as he could.

Although his shift at the mine had kept him up some Sunday mornings until 4, Mrs. Watkins said she had seen him at the 9 a.m. service almost every time. But several months ago Hedges had switched from second shift to a day shift, which he did not like.

And it had kept him away from church four out of every five Sundays.

When he wasn't working, Hedges liked to fish and hunt geese with friends. He also did carpentry work.

Like every miner, he knew how dangerous his work underground was, Hetric said, "but he wasn't fatalistic about it." His friends and family remembered Hedges yesterday as a happy, optimistic man.

At 10:35 a.m., the organist began playing the hymn of which Hedges was so fond. It begins: "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through." But no one sang the words as the congregation had done Sunday.

Watkins read from the eighth chapter of Romans, verse 36: "For your sake we face death all day long."

"I've cried tears over this death," he said. "I think this is the hardest funeral I've ever had to preach."

Then they rolled the coffin out of the church past the "mowing order" list, tacked up in the doorway, with Hedges' name still scrawled on.

The miner's body was taken to the Uniontown cemetery off Ky. 360 and placed in the ground near a field of corn.