

Blessed messes: Living in community

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

In his recent book *The Jesus Way*, the unfailingly helpful Eugene Peterson observes: “Community is intricate and complex. Living in community as a people of God is inherently messy. A congregation consists of many people of various moods, ideas, needs, experiences. . . . It is not easy and it is not simple.”

I thought about that as I continued to ponder [Anthony Robinson’s comments](#) in the January 29 issue on the phenomenon of the megachurch. In the course of his article, Robinson cited Stephen Ellingson’s worry (in *The Megachurch and the Mainline*) that megachurches, in their readiness to abandon traditional ties for the sake of addressing contemporary needs, are not “communities of memory” in the way that most congregations have been. Being a community of memory means being a living part of a large and old tradition, one that extends well beyond the interests of current members.

I learned about this the hard way. Years ago I was asked to chair a committee to help five rural Indiana congregations that were struggling to pay their bills and keep their doors open. Each was located in a small community with a declining population. Each had once been a vital part of a community that included a bank, a drugstore and a public school. Only the churches remained.

My committee came up with the logical solution: do what the banks and schools had done—consolidate. Close the churches; sell the property; organize one new congregation; call a pastor; build a new, efficient, centrally located church building. It was a brilliant idea—and utterly naive.

When we called a meeting with representatives of the five congregations, we encountered immediate, strong and hostile reactions. Didn’t the committee understand that members’ parents were buried in the churchyard, that members had met their spouses in those churches, that their children had been baptized and confirmed there? Our church might not be much statistically, they said, but by golly it’s our church and we love it and we’re not about to give up on it. The grand plan died and my committee was dismissed.

The reorganization concept had some merit. But our committee had forgotten to pay attention to how much people love their churches and how deeply those churches embody historic relationships—and memories.

“Living in community as a people of God is inherently messy,” Peterson reminds us. Being a community of memory is messy too.