

Closing hymns

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [November 16, 2010](#) issue

She was once the queen of the congregation—always elegantly dressed and with a delicate smile. She is the wife of a former pastor who died a long time ago. He was a good man, but her influence in the church has far outlived his influence.

There was a day when she made her way through the church's fellowship hall like a prima ballerina moving graciously across the floor. Sometimes she provided a gentle and caring face on a prophetic sermon that had just been delivered by her husband or one of his successors. At other times she was welcoming a visitor, smoothing an elder's ruffled feathers from a difficult committee meeting, responding to a denominational vote that left someone grumpy or answering questions about the new director of music—all while sipping coffee and "just chatting."

She would hate the characterization, but she was a church politician with a patent leather purse who knew how congregational democracies worked.

Now she is well into her eighties and sequestered in a nursing home. The days of butterflying her way through the halls of the church are over. Her declining health has ripped away all traces of her once-regal countenance, and the old elegance is apparent only by a string of pearls. The deep lines on an always-powdered face accentuate her confusion about why she is still living.

I call for an appointment. It's her way. Before I arrive she will have coerced someone to do something about her hair. But this time a nurse tells me that I should come as soon as possible.

As I make my way to her room it occurs to me that this may be my last visit with her. Earlier in the year dementia began to cloud her once-sharp mind. Now the cancer has made its way through most of her body, and the pain has become so severe that her physician prescribed morphine—the last grace of medical caregivers who have abandoned hopes of curing.

She is foggy, struggling to find the old gifts of conversation. But she knows me, I think.

I tell her all of the reassuring things that pastors say in such a setting. "The Creator who has watched over you all of the days of your life is now holding you in those sacred hands." She smiles and struggles to respond with words I barely understand. I pray for her.

Then in a crystal clear voice she begins to recite the words of old hymns: "Our God Our Help in Ages Past," "Call Jehovah Thy Salvation," "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"—and of course "Amazing Grace." She even knows the second and third verses. I try to say them along with her, but my memory fails as she continues to make her declaration of faith through these historic lyrics.

It is an amazing grace that these old hymns have the power to break through the fog of morphine and dementia. She didn't quote any profound sentences from her husband's sermons or mine. Nothing of the often-repeated church vision statements, the building programs, the great church battles or the Bible studies she led for the Women's Association emerged in the end—not even anything about her many cherished relationships. In her last days it was only the old hymns that endured. *Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

I appreciate the validity of contemporary forms of worship music, and I understand the value of praise choruses for those who find them more accessible than hymns. But I doubt that anyone will be singing "Our God Is an Awesome God" on a deathbed. The problem with this popular song isn't the lyrics, but its lack of gravitas. In the end we need something sturdier.

Our slow demise on earth requires more than the little faith nurtured with thin melody lines that for some reason make you want to close your eyes as you sing. We need the eyes-wide-open great faith of apostles, martyrs, mystics, reformers and countless ordinary saints of the church who've already faced everything we possibly could face. When an old servant of the church is dying, she needs the communion of saints cheering for her as she finishes the race. That is what the scriptures, historic creeds, old hymns and spirituals provide because they were all born out of heartache and suffering.

It's also what the last generation of church ladies are trying to offer us. They may not all die with great hymns on their lips, but the best of them were devoted to a faith that began before them and will outlive them.

So maybe there is something to the old formality, laced with tradition and graciousness, which is now out of style in worship. Beneath its tattered elegance a pastor is sometimes witness to a faith strong enough to carry us all the way home.