

Quotidian acts: What local churches are doing

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

Forty years ago, when my kind and I were still young enough to be licensed to write crabby books (they got reviewed as “prophetic”) about American religion, the focus often fell on the public face of congregations as reflected in newspapers. Books like *The New Shape of American Religion*, *The Improper Opinion* and *The Religious Press in America* aired our complaints about the trivia on which newswriters on “the religion page” were expected to report.

At that time the stigmatizing word, the phenomenon to be feared, was “bourgeoisification,” a term that, alas, made its way into the Oxford English Dictionary. Properly concerned, no doubt more concerned than most churchgoers are today, about issues of poverty, rights, welfare and aid, my generation often created the impression that Christian gatherings would best serve God if they shunned cornerstone-layings, smorgasbords and youth camps—or, if these had to go on, were at least silent about them, thus better to witness in the world.

So what should I make of recent headlines in the religion section of the local biweekly—items, I am sure, like those in hundreds of other community newspapers. Here is a sampling from our paper:

- Speaker to Discuss Recent Trip to Cuba at Service
- Holy Covenant to Dedicate Facility
- The Rev. B. v. T. to Go on Summer Sabbatical
- First Presbyterian to Start Summer Schedule
- St. Cletus Encourages Parishioners to Volunteer
- La Grange Church to Hold Community Gathering
- Monthly Meeting to Focus on Senior Citizen Safety

- Music Duo “Lost & Found” to Perform

Maybe “Cuba” or “Parishioners to Volunteer” or “Senior Citizen Safety” might have passed our scrutiny back then. But not the rest.

Now it is time for a second look at the world such headlines cover. I recall some of the judgments on us judges uttered when we were young. A Chilean Jesuit who heard us professors talking down technology and its dehumanizing effects while romanticizing the peasant world brought us up short with: “Have you ever thought that what you are knocking is that to which our poor are aspiring? Some comfort, longer lives, opportunities for leisure activities, convenience?”

A reviewer who read our attacks on quotidian acts in local churches pointed out that those who criticized found equally cozy ways to socialize in their own milieus, at faculty clubs or weekend retreats. Still another argued that the quiet and loving activities of local churches helped people to overcome alienation, meaninglessness, loneliness and boredom. These taken-for-granted activities were replicated by all healthy churches.

Read this, if you wish, as sentimentalization, as a softening of the critical faculties, as a sure sign of the compromising with reality that comes with aging. I’d rather plead that we notice how, “after 9/11,” we were both instinctively impelled and rhetorically nudged to affirm bonds of family, neighborhood and church, across the lines of age, race, sex, income and taste.

That is what religion-page headlines suggest that local churches are doing. At their best, they are caring for their immediate community while also motivating people to use their religious and communal commitments to move beyond the church basement, the sanctuary or the church yard, and into the public arena and a global mission.