

Life cycles: The mainline lives on

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

"Life dies" will be the label for this column in my computer files. Life dies? Because of global warming? Is this a statement of the human condition, life being "a sexually transmitted disease with a terminal prognosis"? Is this the unavoidable topic the late Dr. Lewis Thomas wanted Americans to talk about: death? He noted: "There's an awful lot of it going around these days."

Such cheerful sayings offer promise, but my mind is on something more banal, the realm of the banal being its natural habitat. The occasion is a recent announcement from *Life* magazine (April 20 issue), a sliver of a publication tucked into our Sunday newspaper and almost lost among the ads.

Is it ironic or optimistic for managing editor Bill Shapiro to title his farewell editorial "We'll be seeing you" and then write: "These are the five words I hoped I'd never have to write. This is LIFE'S LAST ISSUE"? There will be a ghostly resurrection in the form of an archive due soon: www.LIFE.com, which will offer every one of 10 million images going back 70 years.

Life was done in by television images, by competition for readers' attention, and by the general ills that afflict print media today. I'd mourn its passing if it still had its old substantial form. Yet there is positive didactic potential in this story about one more permanent-seeming secular thing that is dying. Remember *Look* or *Collier's* or the *Saturday Evening Post*? Answer yes and you will be sent to a senior facility. Or remember Marshall Field's (as we Chicagoans do, and mourn)? Studebakers? Oldsmobiles? We could extend the list indefinitely, but I hasten to make a point about the world of religions.

These days editorialists can always get a cheap thrill by taking a jab at the "mainline." Religious "competitors" can swagger during their moment in the sun. No one is saying "The Mainline Died," though some like to picture it as comatose because its moment of hegemony passed in about 1960. Critics of mainline churches like to revive the mainline enough to accuse its members of being unpatriotic or too friendly to Palestinian Christians or too semi-p.c. or too naive about pop culture,

which seems to be the new home of expressive Christianity.

One of these seasons those who still remember when mainline Protestants (MPs) could swagger will have died. We can then appraise the mission of the tens of thousands of currently vital MP congregations, and place MP setbacks into perspective.

A little sample: gone long before *Life* magazine were old banners of the mainline that announced “Reformation Rallies.” MP leaders would fill downtown metropolitan arenas with tens of thousands who sang “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” while they assailed the pope and his minions, who, we thought, wanted to take away our liberties. Then came Vatican II—and the main enemy that gave life to MP angers, and direction to its arrows, was gone.

On the assumption that prospering movements, at least today, thrive by having and attacking enemies (“secular humanists,” “liberals,” “pro-gays,” etc.), we have to chronicle the demise of pre-Vatican II Catholicism and observe that this demise helped bring about relative mainline decline. Some blame mainline women for not having enough babies. Others say that we didn’t attract enough immigrants or didn’t hold enough exurbanites. As for most of the MPs, we can say less ironically, “We’ll be seeing you!” Slimmer, trimmer, like late-*Life*, but alive.