

A place to mourn: Grateful for the church

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

I was out of the country recently when a member of my congregation died. When this happens I feel the pain of being unable to do anything helpful, and a little guilt as well. That's when I relearn a basic lesson in ecclesiology: I belong to a community of faith that knows how to be a church in my absence.

Steve's death from a heart attack was completely unexpected. He was 49 with no known health issues. He was a successful and widely respected businessman as well as an officer of the congregation. His loss will be felt for a long time.

Elaine Pagels begins her book *Beyond Belief* with a reference to standing in a church vestibule. She is not a churchgoer. But a few days before, a doctor had told Pagels and her husband that their two-year-old son was terminally ill.

"Standing in the back of that church, I recognized, un comfortably, that I needed to be there. . . . Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon your child; and here was a heterogeneous community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs, and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. . . . Here is a family that knows how to face death."

The rock-bottom reason for the church's existence is to be a community that knows how to deal with death. We gather around Steve's wife and daughter with love and support, reach out in phone calls, e-mails and personal encounters: "We're praying for you; you are in my heart; we love you." In liturgy and the great hymns of the faith, we express the hope of the gospel for the bereaved—that death does not have the last word about us, God does. After "a witness to the resurrection," the liturgical celebration of Steve's life, the community will continue to let wife and daughter know that they are surrounded by God's love as reflected in the community's love.

From thousands of miles away, I was grateful for the church. On the day of the funeral in Chicago, my wife and I walked to a nearby village and found the parish church door open. We walked in and sat in silence for ten minutes, thinking about

and praying for a community of faith thousands of miles away.