

Searching for a church: Life on the ecclesiastical frontier

by [Sarah Hinlicky Wilson](#) in the [August 8, 2012](#) issue



OPTIONS IN STRASBOURG: Finding a community of Christians was not an easy task.
© ANDREW WILSON

Sometimes ecclesiological wisdom pops up in the unlikelyst of places. Reading through Taoism-influenced Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* for the umpteenth time, I couldn't help noticing that her wizards—the best of whom are trained on the isle of Roke in the center of the Archipelago before scattering to heal, protect and guide far-flung communities—are for all intents and purposes the pastors of Earthsea. And like pastors, the wizards discover during the course of their service that the farther they get from the center of power, the less the knowledge they'd learned there helps.

Toward the end of the novel, the protagonist Ged finds himself in the far southeast corner of Earthsea and recites to his friend Vetch the old adage, "Rules change in the Reaches." Vetch heartily agrees. "There are good spells I learned on Roke that have no power here, or go all awry; and also there are spells worked here I never learned on Roke. Every land has its own powers, and the farther one goes from the Inner Lands, the less one can guess about those powers and their governance."

As it is on Earthsea, so it is in this world of ours. The rules do change in the reaches. This is the missionary's double bind, trying to implant the faith in a new soil where

the old forms won't take root, and then finding it nearly impossible to explain why to the board of overseers back home. Sorting out the difference between the eternal and the provisional, the universal and the local, is not an easy task.

It's not just the rules that change, though. The reaches themselves change. It is true that matters of intense concern in the Vatican will probably not get the same airtime among Vietnamese Catholics, for example, and even within the U.S., the coastal expressions of denominations tend not to resemble their midwestern headquarters' ideals. But even this betrays a tendency toward Platonist thinking, as if Chicago were some kind of homogenous entity and New York another and Los Angeles still another. And it overlooks the basic fact of American history and increasingly of the whole planet in this mobile age: migration. The reaches have migrated to all the world's cities and brought their own logic with them. So Rwandan Anglicans set up shop in small-town Virginia, Hmong evangelicals flourish in St. Paul, and it has even happened that a family of American Lutherans find themselves riding the ecumenical roller coaster during their years in Strasbourg, France.

My husband Andrew and son Zeke and I arrived in Strasbourg in the fall of 2008 so that I could take a position at the Lutheran-affiliated Institute for Ecumenical Research. It had been established in this city in 1965 because, it was thought, if France and Germany could finally become friends—symbolized by the Passerelle des Deux Rives footbridge over the Rhine—surely Catholics and Protestants could too. It also helped that Alsace, on the eastern edge (or perhaps better, “reaches”) of France, is the only holdout of Lutheranism in the nation. Martin Bucer and others embraced the Reformation cause as early as 1524, and even the rose-colored sandstone cathedral that is the glory of Strasbourg belonged to the Protestants until King Louis XIV handed it back to the Catholics after annexing the region to France in 1681. Alsace has been traded back and forth between Germany and France ever since—you probably first learned the name Alsace, along with Lorraine, in high school social studies classes about World War II—but the Concordat of 1801, established under Napoleon, has held throughout all the pendulum swings, making this the only part of France with state-funded clergy and religious education for Catholics and for both Lutheran and Reformed Protestants and for Jews. (Strasbourg boasts the second-largest Jewish population in France, after Paris.) So what could be more natural than for us new transplants to find comfort in familiar liturgy and theology, even if spoken in another tongue?

Accordingly, on our first Sunday in our new city we trooped off to the nearby parish of St. Pierre-le-Jeune. The church itself has an unlikely ecumenical history. Built in the late 13th century over 11th-century cloisters, it went over to the Reformation in 1524 under the guidance of Wolfgang Fabricius Capito, but the aforementioned King Louis brokered a deal in 1682: the Lutherans and Catholics were to share the church, the former getting the nave and the latter getting the chancel, with a wall built under the rood screen to keep them apart. Only in 1898 did the Catholics relinquish their claim on the old church, after erecting an enormous Romanesque Revival building of their own just across the river, still known as St. Pierre-le-Jeune but with the tag *catholique* at the end. Undoubtedly the Lutherans got the better deal: the old St. Pierre-le-Jeune, also built of rose sandstone, evokes every mysterious religious emotion an American expat could hope for and boasts a Silbermann organ from 1780 to boot. At the time our German was better than our French, so we went to the German-language service, recognized most of the liturgical tunes and approved the sermons. It looked like we were set.

There was just one thing that deviated from the norm of our homeland. In America, if you darken the door of a new church, then dare to stick around after the service to say hello over coffee, you will have no one to blame but yourself if you end up on a committee. And get invited to teach Sunday school. And encouraged to run for council. Much of American church life is like a suffocating auntie's bosom, taking its cues from the business world, and this holds whether the church is thriving or failing. It often reminds me of the memorable line uttered by a sullen employee in the movie *Idiocracy*: "Welcome to Costco. I love you."

But that was America, this is France. A friendly if brief *bonjour* on the way out the door was sufficient that first Sunday. After all, who wants to join a church committee your first week in a new country? But then the second Sunday: *bonjour*. And the third: *bonjour*. And the fourth: *bonjour*. By the fifth we were beginning to feel lonely, not to say desperate, as the never-ending trips to Ikea and efforts to find out whether peanut butter even exists on this continent were taking their toll. (You can find peanut butter here at African groceries. Reach logic strikes again.)

At this point, in an obvious bid for attention, I asked if there might be an extra French Bible lying around that we could use. On the way to fetch it, the pastor observed mildly—a comment and not a question—"I've noticed you here several Sundays now." I should say he'd noticed us; with an average weekly attendance hovering around 20 in that cavernous space, and not a child in sight except ours, we

were the parochial equivalent of flashing neon lights.

So I explained that we were Lutherans, newly moved here for my work at the institute, and wanted to belong to a church. The mingled delight and disbelief on the pastor's face explained it all. This was not a place where new people showed up wanting to be part of the fellowship of the gospel. It was a place where lapsed people turned up for their marriages and baptisms and where old folk kept coming till the bitter end. Evangelism, such as it was, took the form of free Bach organ concerts. It wasn't that they were unfriendly. They just hadn't the slightest idea what to do with us.

We tried. We really did. We kept showing up Sunday after Sunday for more than a year. We eventually switched to the French service, which drifted up toward 30 a week. We went to the church's New Year's Eve parties. We attended a daylong retreat for young families, for which this parish of 800 scraped up exactly four couples, including us. We loved the liturgy, the music, the setting, the sermons. But church is also community, and community was the one thing we foreigners were in need of most acutely. We could sing hymns at home, put Bach on the stereo and preach the good news to each other, if it came to that. What we needed were friends.

When family came to visit, unacquainted with either German or French, we'd pack them off to St. Alban's, the Anglican chaplaincy in Strasbourg, which unsurprisingly worships in English. They always came back with glowing reports, which we loyal Lutherans routinely ignored. But when we finally came to the cracking point, we decided it couldn't hurt to try.

It didn't hurt at all; actually, it felt wonderful. A glance around at the people gathered in the solemn gray Dominican church (lent out by agreeable Catholic friars) told us immediately what we needed to know: this was a community of foreigners just like us. There were white Brits, brown Malagasies and black Nigerians in large numbers, adorned with flourishes of Canadians, Ghanaians, Pakistanis and odds and ends of other sorts of Europeans. For our own interracial family, it was like a glimpse of heaven on earth. The only thing comparable we'd found among the Lutherans was a charismatic community, which we'd liked very much but whose evening services were impossible to manage with a small child.

But then St. Alban's was Anglican, Church of England even. What to do with that? As leaps go, it was a small one. Our own Lutheran denomination back home is in full communion with the Episcopal Church, and we had no serious or even mild doubts about the congregation's Christian qualifications. But in some respects it did feel like we were forced to choose between the goods we'd been taught to value as Lutherans. Would it be the vernacular (St. Alban's) or a nonsacrificial holy communion (St. Pierre-le-Jeune)? Would it be the living fellowship of believers (St. Alban's) or the preaching of justification by faith (St. Pierre-le-Jeune)? The choice we finally made was probably not the one loyal Lutherans are supposed to make, but the rules change in the reaches. We started going to St. Alban's.

As it turns out, the Church of England's diocese of Europe has its own reaches-related irregularities. After a number of months and with an annual meeting on the horizon, we were asked to sign up as members. "Oh no," we said, "we're Lutherans, not Anglicans. We can't." But apparently this was no impediment. In a chaplaincy outside of English territory, anyone who shows up regularly can be a member. So with a simple signature we suddenly became Anglicans. Well, sort of. We became full-fledged members of St. Alban's, but that didn't make us members of the Church of England, which would require (re)confirmation. Despite this ambiguous status, a few months later my husband was asked to serve on the church council. If they didn't object to us, we saw no reason to object to them, so he accepted.

But there were still some boundaries that could not be crossed. Here we broach the curious ecumenical problem known as transitivity: when fellowship agreements between various church bodies logically should, but actually do not, extend to the other side. Follow this if you can. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is in full communion with the Episcopal Church (USA) through Called to Common Mission. The Episcopal Church is in full communion with the Church of England through the Anglican Communion. The Church of England is in full communion with the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden through the Porvoo Agreement. The Church of Sweden is in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America through the Lutheran World Federation. But the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is *not* in communion with the Church of England.

Which means that as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, ordained in a form of apostolic succession recognized by the Anglican Communion, I am, in a Church of England chaplaincy, allowed to 1) receive the Lord's Supper, 2) be a member, 3) sit on council and 4) even preach. However, I cannot preside at the

Lord's Supper—a funny scruple in sacramental churches, since you can do a lot more damage with a sermon than with the words of institution. The ecumenical process of knitting back together the broken body of Christ does not travel along strictly logical lines.

Once you've become an ecclesiastical two-timer, it's pretty easy to become an ecclesiastical three-timer. In addition to our Sunday mornings first at St. Pierre-le-Jeune and then at St. Alban's, we'd made a habit of going to the Taizé service hosted by the International Church of Strasbourg, which meets in a room attached to the Reformed Eglise du Bouclier, where John Calvin enjoyed a brief stint. This decade-old community had an American Baptist pastor and a smaller though also racially and nationally mixed constituency. For a few years we enjoyed the quiet and candles of the monthly services, not to mention the chance to connect with more people.

Then a curious thing happened. The pastor informed me one day that she and her husband would be returning to the U.S. in a few months. ICS wasn't wealthy enough to import another pastor; did I have any idea how to find somebody to replace her? As a matter of fact, I did. When Andrew and I met, we were both finishing masters of divinity, but he'd decided not to pursue ordination, despite having all the qualifications. Pastoring was not his deepest desire, but, believing in the importance of heeding an external call, he'd always maintained that "if a church calls me to be its pastor, I'll say yes." I pointed out that a church would never call him to be its pastor unless he put himself in a position to get called, and he agreed that was very likely so.

But—you know the refrain by now—the rules change in the reaches. Move to a foreign country, get hooked up with an international church and you might just find yourself called to be pastor. And that's exactly what happened. There was only one little problem: Andrew had never been ordained.

But whose problem was that, exactly? It didn't bother the people of ICS one whit. As a totally freestanding congregation, it had affiliations but no superiors to report to, no requirements to fulfill. The problem was, again, on the side of us signed-and-sealed, Augsburg Confession-confessing Lutherans. No one should publicly teach or administer the sacraments without a regular call, says AC 14—but then, this was a public call issued by an established church; it's not as if Andrew was setting himself up as a freelance pastor. What exactly would it mean for his membership in either of our by now two denominations that he was going to be ordained by an independent

congregation? Nothing at all, probably; but it was all a little weird. In the end, our reasoning was this: if a community asks you to come preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, it's unfaithful to refuse.

Andrew's ordination took place on the same day as the farewell service for the outgoing pastor. Though the members of the church were mainly of the Baptist and evangelical stripe, they didn't require him to be anything other than what he was, theologically speaking. He took a vow to preach and teach the word of God faithfully, to administer the sacraments and to shepherd the flock with the love of the Great Shepherd. When it came time for the laying on of hands, he was laid on by the outgoing American Baptist pastor, an American pastor of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a British Anglican priest, a French Reformed pastor, an American Lutheran pastor (i.e., me), and all the people of the congregation itself. I've since heard a few words of rebuke for some of the layers on of hands whose churches don't officially permit them to do such a thing.

It is hard to imagine an ordination with more extensive ecumenical acclaim—or with less traction outside the single congregation where it happened. No body exists that could even begin to adjudicate this ordination's canonicity or validity. Our own two denominations certainly couldn't accept it, and there's no particular need for us to ask them to do so. We are pretty comfortable living on the ecclesiastical frontier by now.

It's been three churches in three years, and I hope the story will get less interesting as time goes on: we're ready for some stability. It is probably premature to draw conclusions, since the whole point of being in the reaches is that the rules are changing and bending and vanishing and reappearing all the time. But for those who like conclusions, here are a couple.

First and foremost, the frontier is everywhere. It's in your town, but you probably can't see it yet because it doesn't work the way you expect it to. Migrant churches are especially well hidden, and international churches are not good at attracting locals.

Second, ecclesiastical two-timing isn't such a bad idea. Recent history shows that organizational mergers are about the deadliest things churches can do, even between bodies with nearly identical theological commitments. Unity is better exercised, at least at this point in history, by individual people extending their reach

(or reaches) rather than by organizations streamlining theirs. You can't fix all the divisions all at once, but you can become a real bridge between churches, translating them to each other and curing your own parochialism in the process.

Christ "has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14, ESV), so as Christ-bearers ourselves, we are called to make the unity happen in our own bodies too. Unity happens when we put our bodies in more than one church—churches in which we give our voices to praise God, consume the holy supper with our mouths and serve the needy with our hands. The rules change in the reaches, but there is one Lord Jesus Christ everywhere we go.