

# The rest of the story

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue



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The congregation was aging, losing members and worried about its future. In some ways it was the poster congregation for what we mean when we refer to the declining mainline church. It was also the first congregation I served as a pastor.

It was a hard church to figure out because most of the members were Norwegian and not particularly fond of discussing their feelings. During the years I spent there we shared good and bad times, experienced some growth and became much more involved in mission. It had little to do with me and everything to do with whatever it was within the souls of people who were determined, in their quiet way, to be the church.

I left that congregation more than 20 years ago. But recently I received my best glimpse of the unrecognized gift that explains why that church, and many like it, will remain too busy with mission to die.

Scottie was a five-year-old cherished son of that church. I remember him bouncing around Sunday school with his older brother and twirling on his father's hand while being led through the church parking lot. His naturally large eyes looked even bigger behind thick glasses that gave him the appearance of being always surprised.

Scottie's parents joined the congregation because they wanted their sons baptized. Since the congregation was struggling to attract young families, we may have overwelcomed this family. Soon they were very involved, and happily settled into

the life of the church.

Over the years, though, it became clear that something was amiss with the mother of this family. At first she missed meetings, and then we began to see her husband and the boys in worship without her. When she did come she was disheveled and inattentive.

When her husband made an appointment to see me, he plunged immediately into the deep waters. "She drinks so much. I can't make her stop." He went on to describe the horrible arguments, the days he would come home from work to find her passed out when she was supposed to be watching the boys, the bottles hidden around the house, and her repeated fender benders. I was overwhelmed by the private hell this family had been enduring under the church's radar and silently cursed myself for missing the signs. When I inquired about treatment options, he threw up his hands and said, "Don't think I haven't tried. That's how the worst fights start."

Soon after our meeting he received a phone call at work from the police department telling him that his wife had almost burned the house down. That was enough to get her to enter a residential treatment facility, and then there were other visits after that first one. Still the drinking continued. Finally, the husband had no choice but to leave and take the young boys with him.

That's about the time I accepted the call to go to another church. One of the hardest things about leaving a congregation is walking away from stories that are left raggedy and unfinished. Over the years I lost touch with this family as my heart became crowded with the dramas of other lives. But there were times when I wondered.

A month ago I received an e-mail from the current pastor of this church. He wanted to be sure that I knew that Scott was in his second year at the seminary I recently began to serve. I was startled, and within minutes I was on the phone asking Scott to come see me.

The look of surprise in Scott's eyes is long gone. Today his countenance is that of a young man who has already seen too much but who has also found that holy "something else" that appears when we think all is lost.

He updated me on his family and their experiences with the church. Eventually Scott's parents divorced, his father lost his job and their new house, and his mother drank herself into an almost vegetative state that left her permanently in a nursing home.

Good pastors followed me at their church to stand beside them in all of these deep waters. And the congregation rallied to offer babysitting, covered dishes, friendship to both of Scott's parents and many prayers. The boys were given star roles in the Christmas pageants, found their best friends in the youth group and went on mission trips. Everyone knew the family's problems but there was never a word of judgment or even pity. They were just being the church—the holy something else called grace.

When I asked Scott about his sense of call, he said it was pretty simple—he's never been able to get over the love of a congregation that kept showing up at his door year after year when there was only heartache on the other side. "Now," he said, "It's my turn."

We read so much analysis about the church being self-absorbed with its demise. But there are also these stories of congregations quietly being the body of Christ.