

Deaths and resurrections

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 3, 1999](#) issue

Wonderfully restored, 138-year-old Holy Communion Church beckons visitors and worshipers. The *Chicago Tribune* mentions that 20,000 immigrant members once made it the largest Catholic parish in the nation. "Today, the membership is at 200, but church officials said the neighborhood around Holy Communion is coming back and so should the parishioners."

When a city church is leveled by the wreckers' ball, hopes and tears go with it. Cardinals Bernardin and George have presided over a Chicago archdiocese that has seen school after school, church after church close--not because there are fewer and fewer people but because denominational identification so closely parallels ethnic heritage.

It is very difficult for even the hardest-working, best-intentioned congregations with any ethnic heritage to win newcomers at the time of ethnic change. White flight hit Protestants like it hit Catholics. In 1963 there were 108,385 Lutherans in city congregations; in 1983 there were 41,863--and declining. The number of blacks in those churches had grown from 5,413 to 8,555 and Hispanics from 425 to 872--but those were hardly breakthroughs on ethnic lines. Meanwhile, suburban churches prospered.

These dry statistics became more meaningful to me when I recently read an advertisement for a Chicago church auction. Eight Lutheran congregations had merged to form one stronger one, and their buildings all went up for sale. One of those featured was Our Saviour's English Church. Its neighborhood was largely Polish in 1954-55, when I briefly served it while working on my doctorate. At sale time it was down to 251 nominal members, with 76 in regular attendance. Its parochial school was long closed.

In 1958, in the booming suburbs west of O'Hare Airport, I was founding pastor of a church that grew very fast in my seven years there. I preached at its recent 40th anniversary celebration. After decades of boom, it and other churches in the area have seen some decline. West and northwest of there, where shopping malls rise up

from the plains, megacongregations grow. And church-growth experts write about how those churches' pastors are hotshots, just as they probably wrote about Holy Communion and Our Saviour's founding pastors in their day, or about me and my kind in the suburbs in the 1950s.

As a church historian of social-scientific bent, I am aware of population movements, the nature of religious loyalties and other abstractions. But when I saw the ad for the church-building sale, I thought about the people who made up Our Saviour's parish. Mainly blue-collar, sometimes white-collar people, loyal and hospitable, they would invite my spouse and me to dinner in their homes each Sunday. I learned later that a bachelor member of nervous but farseeing disposition used to keep his auto parked in front and running on winter mornings because he was sure our first child would be born during a Sunday service, and we had no car for a hospital rush. A typical, caring gesture there.

People--with all their idiosyncracies--not statistics, matter. May 19,800 returnees find Holy Communion, and may hundreds of new people join the reborn Lutheran congregation.