

Holy stuff: Whats left when a church closes

by [L. Gail Irwin](#) in the [March 19, 2014](#) issue



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The day I visited Lucille to hear the story of how her church had closed, she started talking before I could even turn on my voice recorder. “We don’t know what all happened at the end,” she said. “We were never told where the stuff in the church went to—the pews and cross and things. Maybe they’re still in the building!” The not knowing had kept Lucille in a state of suspended grief—something like the way parents feel when they cannot locate the bodies of dead children. She refused to drive the main street through her hometown, where the church now stands empty. “I can’t go back there,” she said.

Some churches meet in coffee shops; some make use of a “church in a box” kit they set up in school auditoriums. In most settings, however, people of faith still cling fondly, even fiercely, to the dedicated physical space that links them to their faith tradition. A church building—with its windows depicting biblical scenes, its 1950s Sunday school posters, and even the silver set once used for the women’s guild tea—may prompt visceral responses in the hearts of the faithful.

“The church is not a building,” says the old Avery and Marsh song. “The church is a people.” But that’s the church universal; the church institutional is another matter. It is, in fact, a building—with walls, a basement, and the accoutrements accumulated over decades of rummage sales and Christmas pageants. As much as we imagine

the church as a dream in the mind of God, that dream has been made manifest in our world with cement blocks painted aquamarine and a layer of asbestos in the floor.

Amid a cyclone of cultural change, churches that ten years ago were getting by on a shoestring budget with a hundred members are now merging or closing altogether, taking the last steadfast souls on a pilgrimage to new places of worship. These churches leave behind a trail of polished artifacts of their faith—with no clear guidelines about how to disperse or dispose of them.

After the decision was made to close Lucille's church, members gathered to claim any objects their families had given. Lucille didn't know of anything from her family, but there was a painting she dearly loved, a copy of Warner Sallman's *Christ at Heart's Door*. She asked shyly, "Did anyone give that painting?" When no one claimed it, she said, "Pastor, I want that." It now hangs in her living room. Her eyes filled with tears as she showed it to me and told how she had acquired it.

At another church, Pastor Mark guided his congregation through four years of discussion about its decline. The members finally decided to close and have their building demolished because of disrepair. To deal with his own grief, Mark conducted an inventory of the church's contents, strolling alone through the building and snapping photographs of each object. Along the way, he took a picture of a particular spot on the chancel floor he had often gazed at during his prayer time in worship. "I wanted a photo of that view," he told me.

On a visit to a gourmet pizza restaurant housed in a former church, I noticed that the old pews were used as seats. There used to be one additional pew located by the entrance, where patrons could sit while they sipped beer and waited for tables. A server told me that a few months after the restaurant opened, a man entered the restaurant, marched over to the pew by the door, hoisted it off the floor, and announced: "This is my pew." He left the building with it. "Now there's no place for people to sit when they're waiting," she shrugged.

In some cases, the anxious clinging that accompanies a decision to close a church eventually gives way to a more creative generosity. Mark's parishioners wanted to do something to celebrate 90 years of ministry, so they built a moveable stained glass panel they could carry with them wherever they eventually moved. Mark likened it to the Ark of the Covenant.

Some churches hold an auction to disperse those objects that lack sacred meaning. But at one tiny rural church, the members were emotionally connected even to their pots and pans. When the time came to disperse these small items, the 14 members held a meeting. Someone suggested they give each item to whoever was willing to tell a story about why it was meaningful to them. The pastor asked the group what would happen if two people told equally great stories about the same object. There was a silence, until one woman said, “Then we’ll have to tell *more* stories!” The last event the church celebrated together featured the giving away of the objects and the telling of sacred stories.

I once attended an open house in the basement of a church that had closed and become a business office. The redesigned space preserved many of the church’s original architectural features, including its resplendent stained glass. I happened to be standing with one of the former church members, a woman who had been embittered by the closure, as she saw for the first time the way the church’s pews had been repurposed as bookshelves. As she stared at the shelves long and hard, something in her face gradually softened.

In *A Struggle for Holy Ground*, Michael Weldon documents the way that Roman Catholic rituals can help parishioners address their sense of loss after a church consolidation, preventing the prolonged grief that results when believers are separated from their holy places. In the liturgy of deconsecration, sacred objects are ritually washed and lifted out of their former settings in much the same way we strip the altar on Maundy Thursday. A funeral is held for the local church, and its physical form is tended to as carefully as are the bodies of our loved ones.

Protestants claim not to rely on rosaries and relics. We may think that we are above this attachment to holy objects or that grief over their loss is a form of idolatry. Many contemporary Christians define faith in more nomadic terms and do not experience the trauma of spiritual dislocation when asked to leave a church building behind. Still, we are wise to pay attention to the sense of separation that some experience when churches are closed. These places and their objects are brimming with memories and meaning. Amid a sea change, they give people spiritual anchors.

One church I served was born in the flurry of 1960s suburban optimism. It managed to raise a new generation of faithful Christians, but then it began an irreversible decline. In its rush to become a “program church,” it had never furnished the sanctuary with a baptismal font. The church had only a tiny, borrowed silver bowl

used for sprinkling the brows of new Christians.

The lack of a font troubled me. I sometimes wondered if, by omitting this central symbol from the sanctuary, the church had cast a spell on its future, making it impossible for new generations to continue the church's ministry. I finally arranged on my own to have an artist craft a font and stand. Part of me saw the font as a talisman that might revive us in the 11th hour. Maybe if we showed God that we really wanted to experience new life by the waters of baptism, God would spare us our impending death.

It wasn't to be. Shortly after the font was consecrated, I left that church. A year later it closed its doors.

Last summer, my teenage daughter and I visited another church in the same city. As we were listening to the sermon, my daughter—one of the few children I had baptized in the old church—leaned over and whispered, "Mom, isn't that *our* baptismal font?" I peered up at the chancel, and there it was, now perched on a new stand, in a place of honor and shimmering with bittersweet glory.