

The end of an era

By [Diane Roth](#)

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The church where I grew up held their final worship service on Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. I have a copy of the bulletin from the service, even though I wasn't able to attend. The picture on the front of the bulletin is from the church's heyday, in the early 1970s. I keep looking at the picture, thinking about the past and where I am now.

When my family joined the church, I was six years old and the congregation was bursting at the seams. It was the baby boom, the congregation was a mission start, and the ushers couldn't set up the folding chairs quickly enough on Sunday morning. There was not enough room for all of the Sunday school classes. During Vacation Bible School, there were often big tents set up in the back yard, and one summer some of us were even chauffeured over to the synagogue across the street. The event was noted in the local newspaper.

Though we were still a smaller congregation with one pastor, the congregation seemed destined for greatness. We purchased land and had a model for our expansion set up in the church basement. It was all very exciting. All the time I was growing up we were worshiping in what would be the fellowship hall. At the first worship service in the new sanctuary, I remember listening to the pastor preach and thinking, "If I were a man, that is what I would want to do." It was a fleeting thought then, because there were no women pastors, as far as I knew. And I was very shy. I couldn't imagine myself speaking in front of a large group. I had no idea where that thought came from.

This is the church where I was nurtured in faith, where I was confirmed. It was the church that supported me when I became a missionary to Japan, the church that recognized my gifts for ministry and endorsed me for my seminary studies, the church where I was ordained into Word and Sacrament ministry. It was the church where I taught Sunday school, sang in the choir, read lessons, sat on the church council, preached my first sermon.

It was a congregation where I also saw and experienced a slow process of decline. Throughout the years I saw wonderful relationships and painful conflict. Talented people came and went in a congregation with a reputation for innovative worship.

"Why does a church close?" my husband asked me as we were reminiscing recently. It was a wistful question. In number of years at least, the congregation seemed too young to die.

"I don't know," I replied.

And I was being truthful, even though throughout the years, I had had plenty of ideas about what was wrong. As a lay leader, I even had some strategies for how to fix it. Better Sunday school, personal relationships, adult education, re-immersing ourselves in the neighborhood. I was being truthful, even though I know that there were outside challenges and inside challenges for our congregation. We were hampered by a highway location that made us easy to see but difficult to find. We had had congregational conflicts that left us wounded. And there were cultural changes going on that I didn't know about then but have only begun to understand in retrospect.

Why does a church close?

It could have been any one of those reasons, or a combination of them, or something else entirely. I don't know.

But here's one thing I do know: people are born, people live, people die. Congregations are not people, but they are like people in some ways. When a church closes, it is like a funeral. It is the end of an era. When the church is a fairly young one, like mine was, there are exhausting efforts to return to life and health, and there is deep grief when the doors finally close.

Each life has a purpose. So does a congregation. Maybe it is an illusion, though, that any one congregation is meant to last forever. It is an illusion borne of many things: perhaps our sturdy, strong buildings make us think of permanence. Perhaps a culture that worships growth and sees a congregation as simply an organization but not an organism plays a part.

I don't know.

Congregations are born. Congregations live. And sometimes, congregations die. And what really matters, it seems to me, is that while we live, we know we have a purpose, that God lives and breathes and loves through us.

Reformation Lutheran Church, you are the servant of the Lord. Go in peace.

*Originally posted at [Faith in Community](#)*