

The afterlife of a church

By [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

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A few weeks ago, I was feeling nostalgic. It was the fifth anniversary of my family's pilgrimage from Southern California to suburban Chicago for my interview weekend at First Congregational Church of Western Springs. It feels odd to call it that, though; it wasn't so much an interview as a time of holy conversation, prayer, worship, laughter, feasting, and fellowship. The terms of my call were unofficially worked out at a kitchen table while the Super Bowl droned on in the other room. There have only been a handful of times the movement of the Spirit has been abundantly obvious to me, and the thunderous call to serve as one of the pastors at First Congo was one of them.

As joyful as I was about our return to the Midwest, leaving California was excruciating. I've [written about the pain of leaving my beloved church](#), and [I've written about the grief of witnessing, from afar, the closure of that church](#). There isn't much more to be said about that.

Now I'm witnessing, again from afar, the church's afterlife. The space was deeded, wisely, to the Disciples of Christ Pacific Southwest Region. Last fall at the Disciples Pastors Conference, I heard about the plans for it—innovative, risky, wonderful plans.

Yet as I listened to the organizers go on—their enthusiasm and hope palpable—I found myself practically dizzy with grief. In an odd way, being as far away as I am, my sadness exists in a sort of time capsule. I haven't had the experience of driving past the buildings, of meeting up with other former members at one of the other local Disciple congregations, of sorting through dusty archives in the third-floor office that hadn't been used for 30 years. So while it was right and good that the resurrection was underway, I was stuck in Holy Saturday.

The afterlife of South Bay Christian Church is emerging, though, and I'm glad for it. It's called the [Hatchery](#), and it's a completely different model for how to be the church in the world. I still find it a bit dizzying, though in good ways.

I am ultimately a fairly old-fashioned pastor. First Congo is a great fit for me, partly because it is in many ways deeply traditional. Traditional worship, traditional governance, traditional Sunday School, traditional traditions. This isn't to say that we're some sort of throwback. There's a vitality here that simply couldn't be if we were clinging to a 1950s model of ministry. In fact, the results of an all-church survey revealed that we're what the consultant called a "progressive-adaptive" church; that's not the mark of a church fixated on the dry bones of the past. Still, for all our openness and willingness to change, we embrace the best of the traditions passed down by our spiritual (and ecclesiastical) forebears.

Here's some anecdotal evidence of the marvelous mash-up of old and new that takes place here. My daughter is in the children's bell choir. It doesn't get much more traditional than that, right? (Oh, how I used to love watching the folks at South Bay play handbells; that's where I learned how much a ringer's personality comes out in the way he or she plays.) Recently the children's bell choir played in worship—along with the children's *steel drum ensemble*. I might be going out on a limb here, but I don't think there were many Caribbean beats getting thrown down during the Introits of the 1950s. It was delightful.

I digress. The point is this: I'm impressed, humbled, and disoriented by what is unfolding in the place where my old church was. I'm excited for it too, though I doubt my excitement will ever lose a tinge of grief. I knew that South Bay would close, and I hoped that something Eastery would emerge. And it is emerging.

But there won't be handbells at the Hatchery. That's for sure.