

Into thin air: Unchurchy church names

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 22, 2002](#) issue

A weekly magazine not unfriendly to evangelicals, megachurches and the marketplace recently pointed to a trend disturbing to its editors—and to us. Gene Edward Veith reports on it in words that I wish I'd said. They appear in a comment on one Harold Camping, who claims to love Jesus but hates his Body, the church. "Satan has now set up his throne in the church," Camping says. Stay away. (And, I suppose, send money to Mr. Camping instead.)

This incites Veith to comment on churches that are "running away from their churchly identity." He writes: "First the vogue was for local churches to drop their denominational affiliation from their name. Then came the fad of dropping the word church. The Community Assembly of God Church became first 'Community Church' and then 'The Community Family Worship Center.' Now, words that so much as connote religious activities are considered too negative for the unchurched, so we have congregations that go by names such as 'The Center for Family Love.'

"Such churches are doing everything they can to eliminate anything that might make them seem like churches. . . . Make it all like a pop concert or a TV talk show. If this is all there is, no wonder more and more Christians think they might as well stay home."

One wonders about that last sentence. The leading actors in the Fade Away Church Movement certainly must have read marketing guides. Those guides must have told them that the Fade Away Church is what many want. If you poll the unregenerate and let them set the terms for the unregenerate, this is what you'll get, and many will come.

But let's take another look at the logic of this. Remember: the church is people and people are offensive. One stumbles over them; they annoy and scandalize. Even if they try to do everything right, including presenting the claims and promises of God in the world, they will still offend. So, following the thinking of the Fade Away

Church, what should we do about them? Get rid of them progressively, of course.

Where can those who want to sanitize the church go if even the nondescript “Center for Family Love” begins to strike them as too religious? They can apply their fading act to their buildings. I recently read that someone in Switzerland is designing a building that is a not-building. What the article described was so ephemeral and evanescent that I could not quite get the picture. But I think the idea was that the outline of the building would consist of sprays of water that create the illusion of walls. When you turn off the water, presto! No building. Why not build such a church?

I guess we could call that “the invisible church.” The congregation could consist of people showing invisible love. But we would still be stuck with people, those tangible, offensive, smelly things called human beings, those “really real” children of God who refuse to act like “virtually real” people. If we ever fade to the Let Us Spray Temporary Church of Shadows that Camping and his kind seem to want, there will be just one thing wrong with it: It will have nothing to do with the Christian faith. And, therefore, it is likely to sell well.