



For 8 churches, death will bring resurrection

One by one, worshipers at Holy Communion Lutheran Church will carry off the church's most treasured objects Friday afternoon.

Accompanied only by the echoes of their final prayer, Psalm 22—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—they will walk down the aisle and out the front door, taking the baptismal font, candlesticks, communion chalice, the Bible from the pulpit.

And when the doors close behind them, Holy Communion Lutheran Church, a congregation born before the Great Chicago Fire, will be dead.

Holy Communion, 3010 N. Lavergne Ave., is one of eight Lutheran congregations on the Northwest Side that are shutting down for good this week.

On Sunday, a new congregation named United in Faith, gathered from those eight closed churches, will celebrate Easter together for the first time.

United in Faith does not yet have a pastor or a church building (it will hold its first service in the gymnasium of Taft High School), but its 500 members do have a fervent belief that the consolidated community can offer more to God and the world than its eight small parents did.

With the demographic and economic advantages that come from

consolidation—and with a burst of energy that isn't accounted for in the statistics—United in Faith has made big plans.

Along with the church, the congregation is considering launching after-school music programs, outreach to Hispanic and Polish immigrants and a service that would match teens with retirees as mentors. Down the road, congregation leaders hope to open a school and perhaps create elderly housing.

"We really will be able to reach out and serve families in the community. . . . It's where people have needs and hurts," said Dorothy Goos, president of the United in Faith church council. "We took a look at it and thought, 'This is what the church is really about.'"

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Cooperation began a decade ago among 11 congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in adjoining neighborhoods: Holy Communion, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Nebo Lutheran Church, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Medill Avenue Lutheran Church, Gladstone Park Lutheran Church, Peace Lutheran Church, Our Lord's Lutheran Church and three others that ultimately chose not to take the leap.

The congregations, shrinking and aging, focused more and more on their own survival. They did not want to slip away, one by one.

A year ago the pastors proposed consolidation, agreeing that a new congregation should be created with a new pastor, a new building, a new name and an identity that did not put any of the eight predecessors above the others.

Churchgoers initially balked; some have left the congregations altogether. Most went on to decide that consolidation was the best option.

But knowledge that the end is coming, and belief that something better will emerge from it, has not made the transition easy. Many members recall worshiping in these churches with their grandparents. Many have spent years fighting for the survival of these churches.

"These are Northwest Siders, so they are very reserved," said Rev. Robert Goldstein, the pastor of Holy Communion and St. Andrew's until Friday evening. "But this week has been a very emotional week."

Anticipating that, both clergy and laypeople did what they could to prepare. Many of the churches have included historical recollections as part of their worship this year, as well as giving congregants plenty of other opportunities to talk, tearfully, even angrily, about what was going on.

The final transition was quite intentionally tied to the Christian Holy Week, designed to make the most of the themes of death and rebirth that are rehearsed through the celebration of Jesus' Passion and Resurrection.

But that timing was more than a gimmick or, heaven help us, a "coping strategy." Congregation leaders wanted to remind people that church is the means, not the end—it's about far more than a nice place to go on Sundays.

"On one hand we have to say that a worship place is sacred. On the other hand we can't confuse that worship space with God," Goldstein said. "This has forced every member of every congregation to examine why they really belong."

The death of eight churches has stripped away what their members had come to depend upon—buildings, pastors, well-worn habits of worship.

For 36 hours or so, their vigil within a vigil, all they will have is hope.

"There's the excitement of knowing what's going to happen," Goos said. "What I'm hearing now is, 'Let's get on with it!'"

E-mail: skloehn@tribune.com