



BANNERS from its eight predecessor churches adorn the temporary home of the newly formed United in Faith Lutheran Church, Chicago.

MEGA merger

Part of a growing trend, eight struggling churches aim for a bright future together

BY MARK BALDWIN

Chrysler and Daimler-Benz. Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. Amoco and British Petroleum. Redeemer and St. Paul?

It's not exactly Wall Street-style merger mania, but more and more ELCA congregations are discovering that merging with a nearby parish is a powerful way to strengthen themselves

for mission. And while "yoked," or two-point, parishes have long been a fixture in rural areas, the trend has begun catching on in metropolitan areas. Migration to the suburbs of traditionally Lutheran ethnic groups—such as Germans, Swedes and Norwegians—weakens old congregations to the point where they could provide little more than basic pastoral care to a dwindling number of parishioners.

"When you have only 50 people in church, it's hard to do anything but maintain your building," said Bishop Kenneth Olsen of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. "[What's required] is a new understanding of why you're the church, not for your own sake but to care for the community around you."

Olsen is shepherding what is believed to be the largest ELCA consolidation: eight **Northwest Side Chicago**

congregations, each of which drew 15 to 20 worshipers every Sunday. On Easter Sunday they began life as United in Faith Lutheran Church. It now has a baptized membership of about 400. And last year two small **South Side Chicago** congregations joined forces to form Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran.

Other congregations nationwide are part of the trend. In **Wayne, Neb.**, two century-old Lutheran congregations that faced each other across the town square merged to form 1,200-member Our Savior. The two congregations were already studying a possible consolidation when a fire caused by a lightning strike gutted one of the church buildings, hastening the process. Since the merger, Our Savior has built a \$2.1 million addition to its building.

In **Tenafly, N.J.**, 350-member Trinity Lutheran combined ministries with a 50-member Korean congregation led by Pastor John Choi in a setup made more challenging by the language barrier. "In many ways it's much more of a side-by-side arrangement," said Thomas Donahue, pastor of Trinity. "We have two English services and one in Korean, and each time we do a joint (English-Korean) service, we get a little better at it." Each pastor delivers a brief homily in his language.

In **Detroit**, Genesis Lutheran was born 15 years ago from the merger of two struggling congregations. More recently its pastor, Skip Wachsmann, was called on to advise two congregations that became Revelation Lutheran, Detroit. In **Waukegan, Ill.**, Trinity United Lutheran was produced by the merger of three congregations, two of which were in "desperate" financial shape, Olsen said.

In every case, those involved say, the key to success has been a laserlike focus on mission.

"In some people's minds, this is probably a way to keep the wolf away from the doors—it will build membership enough to pay the bills," Donahue

said. "To my mind, if that's the only reason you're doing this, you might as well close the doors. We need to [merge] for mission, to reach out into the community to gather people together."

Karen Thompson, who is on the executive board at Chicago's United in Faith, said the mission focus required people to change long-held ways of thinking. "Before, mission was maybe sharing space with Alcoholics Anonymous," she said. "We're trying to create a whole new mindset. That's difficult because people are used to maintenance

ministries. They're not used to dreaming, not used to spending money."

Nowhere is United in Faith's mission focus more apparent than in the budget. The eight predecessor churches spent 3 percent or less of their budgets on mission, said Anthony Harris, a Portland, Ore.-based consultant who worked on the merger. "It'll probably be well over 50 percent in the new church," he added. "If it's not, we've failed. Most of the previous budget went into maintaining buildings, which to me is anti-stewardship. Today we

More than bricks and mortar

BY CAROL MUELLER

Since Easter Sunday, when my childhood congregation was one of eight that melded into United in Faith Lutheran Church, Chicago, I've been telling myself that it's not the building I feel bad about. Buildings, after all, are only bricks and mortar. And wood. Beautifully carved wood, like the altar that has welcomed worshipers for 90 years and the baptismal font where generations of babies have been christened.

OK, maybe it is partly the building. I do have a history at Our Saviour English Lutheran Church. This is the church where my mother was confirmed and my parents were married. It's the church where I was baptized and confirmed and where I met my husband; the church where we were married and where we brought our first baby to be baptized.

And now it's closed. Suddenly I can relate to the news stories about dying churches in crumbling city neighborhoods.

But this neighborhood isn't crumbling and neither is the church. The old building wears its age well. It's solid and good, like the people who have gone there. It's just that in the last years there weren't enough of them.

"Where do all the new families in the neighborhood go?" I asked the only person I recognized at the final service.

"They don't go to church," she replied.

That's a pity. I think they have missed a good bet. It's in those wide wooden pews that I learned the stuff that has gotten me through life, the stuff about God and good and grace and mercy and forgiveness. About kindness, too, and forbearance.

Especially forbearance. Though perhaps no virtue by today's standards of conduct, it was the benchmark of behavior in that congregation. People there were not demonstrative and seldom wore their emotions on their sleeves. When adversity came, they didn't make a fuss; they made coffee and made the best of it.



PRICELESS MEMORIES, such as Carol Mueller's wedding in Our Saviour Lutheran, Chicago, linger in every church.

So I tried not to make a fuss either, even when my throat constricted as I knelt for the last time at that familiar communion rail.

It was only when the wonderful old organ struck up the hymn *I Love to Tell the Story* that the candles began to swirl and the stained-glass windows blurred. That's when my upbringing failed me. And I noticed I wasn't the only one.

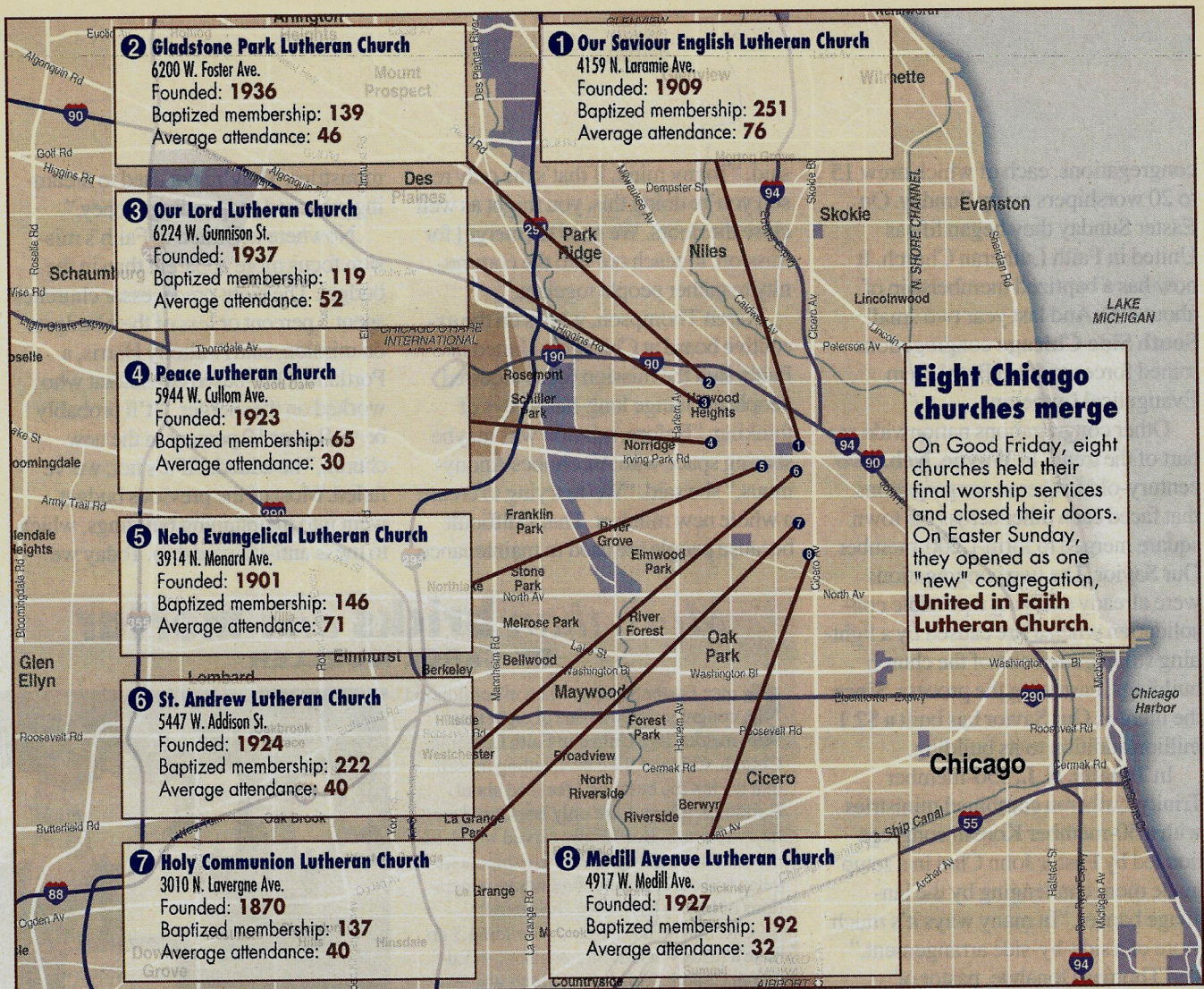
But the congregation of that church will survive and go on. They are uniting with others in similar circumstances to form a new community of faith in a new home.

And I will go back to the church of my adult life, where I now have a history as long and as dear to me as the first.

What about that church building of a million memories? It will be rented, they say, or sold. That's the reality and nothing I say can change it.

All I can do is tell the story. **W**

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have a budget that's mission-driven."

With mission in mind, United in Faith is working with city and state officials to find a site on which to build a church and create a "campus" for ministry, said Dorothy Goos, congregation president. "We want to meet the demands of ministry in the 21st century."

One certain emphasis will be reaching out to the neighborhood's Polish and Hispanic immigrants.

Although merger opens new doors, it inevitably opens wounds, too, as worship styles differ, church buildings are sold, pastors change and congregational leaders assume new roles.

"People take time finding their roles in a new church," said Martin Russell, pastor of Our Savior in Wayne, Neb. "People historically knew their roles in the former congregations. If they were a leader in the two predecessors, what's their role now?"

Russell also cites "territorial" issues for groups such as ushers and altar guilds that are heavily invested in church life. "Be willing to talk openly about these issues," he said.

But the touchiest subject by far is the fate of church buildings as parishioners grieve the sale of the site of baptisms, weddings and myriad other emotionally powerful occasions (see "More than bricks and mortar," page 33). Yet finding a new site can be crucial to forging a congregational identity.

"We've seen grief surface in many ways," Thompson said. "Anger. Pulling away. Threats of leaving. You have to resign yourself to losing people. We just encourage them to find a new home church."

Harris said he told United in Faith, "Even if you guys have to worship in a warehouse for a year, it'll probably be good for you." That's the one time

they really got mad at me." Yet selling the properties of the predecessor churches is vital to United in Faith's success. "Liquidating that many properties will make them financially able to make mission choices," Harris said.

"We had pledged as part of our merger that we would not use the existing buildings," said Wachsmann of Genesis in Detroit. "To do that, we had to rent a church for three years. In hindsight, that was a blessing. Now there are people who don't even remember where others went to church before."

Olsen thinks the mission potential of merger far outweighs the pain. "This is a chance for the whole church to rethink how we're doing ministry," the synod bishop said. "I'm convinced we need to be somewhat radical in how we 'do' church if we're going to be a witnessing church." **W**