

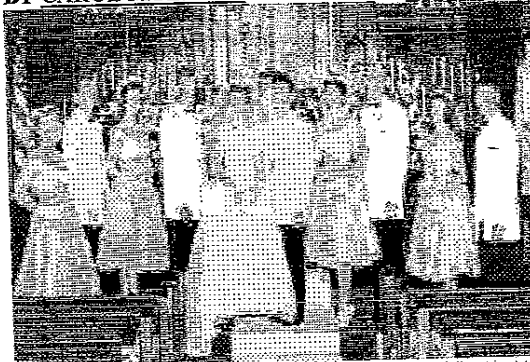
## More than bricks and mortar

*Parishioners tells story of her church's merger*

BY CAROL MUELLER

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

**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.

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.

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