

# Recalling so many ‘beacons of faith’



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For me, the holiday season always brings churches to mind, even in this virus-dominated year when parish doors were often closed or dark worry altered the mood in the spaced-out pews.

I’ve not been a regular church-goer for many years, for my own reasons, so the pandemic’s effect on my spiritual life has been negligible. But churches abound in my memories, and over my time as a newspaper reporter I have told many church stories.

At Christmas 2007, I reported from North Trinity Lutheran Church in rural Walsh County, built in 1893, closed in 1953 but still a beacon for descendants of its Swedish immigrant founders. At Christmas Eve, the little church’s cast-iron bell rang out once again in the starry night, and people held cellphones dialed to elderly loved ones in California and other distant places so they could recall the Christmases of their youth. (In 2005, I was told, North Trinity’s bell sounded in Iraq, on the phone of a Walsh County soldier stationed there.) The church of my youth was Our Savior’s Lutheran in Valley City, N.D. I was baptized, confirmed and married there, and I remember midnightclear Christmas Eves with the lush indoor scent of evergreen wreaths, the weight and shine of the polished brass candle lighter I carried as an acolyte, and the choir singing “Beautiful Savior.” A high school classmate sang that lovely song so nicely just a couple years ago as we sat together at the funeral of another classmate.

Funerals. My mother died when I was 16, my father three years later, and their funerals

were at Our Savior's. The somber church setting, the presence of friends and family, the kind and comforting words – all of that stays clear in my memory.

Then, for years, weddings and baptisms – happy occasions – drew me to churches. Near Strasburg, N.D., dear friends were married in a church built by Germans from Russia, and I watched, transfixed, as young people danced polkas, waltzes and schottisches – expertly, exuberantly – at the wedding dance.

Eventually, though, funerals again became the more common draw. My brothers.

Old friends. College fraternity brothers. Work colleagues and other figures who had influenced the course of my life.

And there were funerals for churches.

That has been a recurring story for decades now: the fading and closing of so many little churches, most of them built by immigrants from Norway, Iceland and Sweden, from Poland and Germany and other “old countries.” I have gazed in wonder at some of the world's great cathedrals: St. Patrick's in New York, Notre Dame in Paris, the 11th century gothic Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim where old Norwegian kings were crowned. But it's the plain little country churches, their proud spires visible and their bells sounding for miles across the prairie, that really inspire me because of the history they represent.

If the church is open, I sit in a curved oak pew, feel as much as see light come through stained glass, and imagine immigrant families trooping in to find their places and hear the gospel in their mother tongue. But as farms were consolidated and people died or left, once-thriving churches emptied.

Some burned, struck by lightning. Others fell to windstorm or rot, or there were too few people remaining to pay for upkeep and insurance. The last old caretakers grew too old to paint or shingle.

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“The platters were the first to be auctioned, reminders of ham dinners every Fourth of July,” the New York Times' Patricia Leigh Brown wrote from Osterdalen Evangelical Lutheran Church at Harwood, N.D., in 2002. “Then came the pickle dishes, the stainless steel and silver forks, the coffee urns, the Sunday school folding chairs, the Hammond doublekeyboard organ, the long oak pews and the hymnals. ... The stained-glass windows were last to go.”

Spiritual home to another, smaller branch of Lutherans, Aadalen Free Lutheran Church was built on a rise a mile south of Fairdale, N.D., in Walsh County.

It hosted a small gathering in 1986 to mark the congregation's centennial, and I was invited to record the event in a column.

The church was founded by people who had come from Aadalen, a narrow valley in eastern Norway.

Fingal Rundhaug was elected the first parish president. His great grandson, Tilford Rundhaug, presided over the centennial.

The church still stands, though it no longer offers services, locals report. A former member of the congregation has been working to keep it presentable. That would please Helny Ohnstad, who lived in Grand Forks but returned to her home church every summer to help organize a service in Norwegian.

Ohnstad died in 2014.

She had told me the congregation numbered about 15 in 1986, but included no children.

“The men who are able are always here,” she said. “But some aren’t able.”

At the centennial service, where all sorts of Lutherans were welcome, there were songs of faith and a sermon in Norwegian.

The reception featured lefse. And the people walked among the graves and knew the names.

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