

Today I'm called to talk about one of the saddest things that happens in the life of the Northern Illinois Conference: the death of a Methodist church. This year at the fall conference we prayed over eight churches that were discontinued: **York House, Glenbrook Korean, Ringwood, Community, Fernwood, Faith, Bethel, and Elkhorn** (note: these closings are not all from one year as the pandemic delayed action on some).

I look around this building and I see a lot of life: I see a pre-school. I see a choir. I see an art class, and a rummage sale and a whole social network that is so important to the life of a community. One of the things Peggy and I have always treasured about this church is connections. When our children were growing up in this church, we knew that many people, all over La Grange, were watching out for them, because they were connected through this church.

So I have to think that those eight churches, and others like them, must have had that same significance, that same importance, that same weight in their communities. Far more than "two or three gathered" in Jesus name, they were communities of believers, like us.

What happened?

Did the community shrink, people moved away, and there wasn't anyone left to be the church?

Did the church lose sight of its mission in the community, "open hearts, open minds, open doors"?

Was there some sort of conflict? Generational? Issues such as diversity and inclusion where believers could not reconcile?

At the Annual Conference I didn't get the answers to those questions, but my fervent prayer is that the loving, committed, motivated members of this congregation, with God's help, won't let that happen here in La Grange. UMC Pastor Timothy McClendon said: Many ... of our declining churches ... turned into family chapels ... i.e., too much intimacy without welcoming the stranger.

Fortunately, that's NOT who we are. Even in the pandemic we have welcomed the stranger. But we can't rest on that. We must continue to be the church that is connected to the community, and reestablish connections that were dissolved as a result of COVID-19.

Renewal is waiting for us.