

Why Churches Are Closing in Churchville, USA

Churchville, Iowa, is barely big enough to Google.

It's just a small country town—about a dozen or so houses and a church. Townspeople don't even have a traffic light.

"We've got two stop signs—one going in, and one going out," said Dennis Johnson. He's been living around these parts for going on 69 years.

It wasn't always like that—back when the Great Western Railroad came through town. Those were Churchville's glory days. There was a stockyard and a grocery store. They even had a hotel.

But that was a long time ago, and the trains don't rumble down the tracks anymore. The stockyard is empty; the grocery store boarded up.

But what Churchville lacked in people, it made up for in faith. The Catholics built a church there—Assumption Parish. So did the Lutherans.

It wasn't one of those high-falootin' megachurch buildings with flashing lights and smoke machines. No sir. The Church of the Assumption was built in keeping with Midwestern sensibilities.

It had wooden pews, a small altar and a few stained-glass windows. It was a simple country church—a small parish of about 50 families that took pride in looking after their own.

But time has been unkind to the churches of Churchville. The Lutheran church shuttered its doors some time ago, and now the Church of the Assumption will suffer the same fate.

"They told us we were not viable," church member Emily Cassady told me. She's been attending the church with her husband and four children for 15 years.

The bishop drove down from Des Moines to break the news to the small congregation in April: After Sept. 1, their beloved church would be turned into a shrine, and they would have to find another place to worship.

The exact reason for the closure was not made clear—and that frustrated folks like Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Cassady.

"They said they wanted us to experience a bigger church experience," she told me. "They said we aren't getting what we need. They said we needed a bigger church experience, but we thought our church experience was fine."

Truth be told, they're a pretty self-sufficient bunch. They handle the books, they teach the children about religion. Families take turns mowing the grass and plucking weeds and touching up the trim on the brick building.

"There was a gentleman who lived down from the church, and he didn't have a phone," Mrs. Cassady said. "The weather was so bad one Sunday that we had to close the church. We went to his house and knocked on his door to tell him—because he's normally the first person at the church."

Who would do something like that in a big church? she wondered.

But their pleas to keep the church open were hopeless. The big-city bishop had determined that bigger is better.

"A lot of us go to this church because we want the smaller church experience," she said. "We like that. We know everybody there on a personal basis."

Mr. Johnson was baptized in that church. So was his father.

“My whole family was baptized in that church,” he said. “It’s really upsetting how these big-city ideas are crumpling the small parishes.”

His voice softened a bit as he reflected on 69 years of Bible readings and Communions in the tiny town of Churchville.

“It hurt everybody,” he said of the closing.

It especially hurt the children—like Mrs. Cassady’s three boys—the altar servers.

“They keep asking us why, and I don’t have an answer to tell them—other than sometimes life is not fair,” she said.

Assumption Parish gathered together on Sunday for a final Mass. It was a sad day, for sure—as the faithful bid farewell to the last church in Churchville.

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