

Churches seek new life under new names

by [Jack Jenkins](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue

For Living Faith Lutheran Church, the name change was as much about the future as the past. On the last Sunday of June, the Rockville, Maryland, congregation formally bid goodbye to its old name, Crusader Lutheran Church.

"We're not saying [Crusader] was a bad name," said Sandra Cox Shaw, the church's pastor. But now "our name will no longer be a stumbling block for people who want to visit us and get to know us."

Comments about the church's "militaristic" and "non-Christian" name reached a "critical mass" last year, said Michael Lidell, a former parish lay leader.

Concerned about the church's reputation, Lidell suggested a name change at an administrative meeting in May 2010.

But the process of changing the church's name—or "renaming," as church leaders call it—turned out to be complicated. Few local churches had changed their names. So leaders learned as they went along, hosting town hall-style meetings, learning how to file for a new charter and how to change the church's website.

After a yearlong process, the 140-member congregation, affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, celebrated its new name. "We affirm that we go on into the future a newly named entity but with the same mission," Shaw said on June 30.

While Living Faith's story might be uncommon, it is not unique. The seemingly mundane topic of a church name has become a flashpoint for U.S. congregations, with many renaming themselves in recent years for pragmatic, theological or cultural reasons.

Some Baptist churches have removed *Baptist* from their names. For example, what was once Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, attracts 1,000

worshippers each Sunday to the Fellowship at Two Rivers.

It's not just a megachurch phenomenon, and some Baptist churches remain Baptist even if the word is not in the name.

Name changing "is an epidemic," said Bill Leonard, professor of Baptist studies at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, citing the success of nondenominational churches and the lack of Southern Baptist loyalty as driving the trend.

Leonard also noted that the Baptist brand has been tarnished by controversial congregations like the antigay (and independent) Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas.

"A number of churches on the left and the right are concerned that people are turned off by the Baptist name," Leonard said. "They believe that in the public square Baptists have looked shrill, unwelcoming, sectarian."

Church name changes can also mark a shift in the outlook or message of a congregation. When the First Reformed Church in Allendale, Alabama, voted to change its name to Lighthouse Community Church in 2004, large sections of the congregation resisted.

"It didn't go over well," said Steve Demers, who became the church's pastor shortly after the change. He added that the church lost about a third of its congregation over the renaming.

More recently, the Lighthouse congregation decided on yet another change—to break away from the Reformed Church in America, a move that Demers said was tied to the earlier name change. "We wanted the name to say something. Many people won't attend [Reformed churches] based on preconceptions of what *Reformed* means," Demers said. "The whole stigma of denominations has proven divisive."

The renaming process at Living Faith Lutheran Church in Maryland also sparked differing opinions in the pews. "People felt very passionately on both sides of the issue," Shaw said. "Some felt tied to the name of the church in which their children were baptized and married, . . . [and some] understood 'crusade' as a crusade against poverty and oppression."

Still, the lure of a new name often wins out: Lidell said Living Faith's new name "much better reflects what's happening within our church." —RNS