

Home church: Gratitude for Ascension Lutheran

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

The Martyrs move their residence and parish membership every 43 years, so every 43 years I should devote a column to my parish, Ascension Lutheran in Riverside, Illinois. I have written so many articles and several books about life in the local church that readers have often expressed curiosity about my own ties. It is easier to write about marriage if one is enjoying a happy marriage, as I have been privileged to do with the late Elsa and the lively Harriet Marty. It is easier to write about family life if one is enjoying a creative home situation, as I have been privileged to do. It is easier to write about a local church if personal experience is positive, as ours has been.

Ascension is not and could not become mega or “large” in its bordered community. (I like to note that to the southwest are gravel pits, to the west Brookfield Zoo, to the north Jewish cemeteries, and to the east Berwyn and Cicero and then Chicago.) Ascension experiences what students of inner-ring suburbs everywhere find: the child-filled boom years that followed World War II for two decades are over. So Ascension is “a small church,” but like so many, it brings its assets and understandings to the larger, global church.

Ascension saw me through the loss of Elsa and enthusiastically welcomed Harriet. Assistant pastor Gustav Schultz and his team saw six next-generation Martyrs through some of their teen years; they are all active believers and disciples in their parishes. As for music and liturgy, we’ve been blessed with nationally known cantors Paul Westermeyer and Randy Sensmeier, and now with up-and-comer Beau Surratt. The three have high standards and good taste, showing a lapse only in that they let me sing in the parish choir when I am in town.

Six pastors and a number of interns at Ascension have been ministers of nothing but the gospel, and counselors, admonishers and encouragers in good times and in bad. Legendarily pastors are a bit defensive when “nonstipendiary” ordained ministers in

the pews are critical, but I cannot remember receiving anything but affirmation. The nearest exception was when Pastor Paul Landahl, now my bishop, knowing that I had written that no competitive sports analogy had ever worked in a Christian homily, was guarded about using a pro-Cubs illustration in one sermon. I've learned from teaching seminary theology with former pastor Linda Lee Nelson, and from conversing with current pastor Roger Timm about religion-and-science.

Ascension members participate in many extraparish and larger-church roles, but none would say we do as much as we can. The blight of lukewarmness is also there, as some do not attend church regularly enough, do not invite others and fail in all the ways congregations can and do fail. On the other hand, we have been spared conflicts, and one does not ever attend meetings expecting to enter a war zone, something which too many congregations provide. Intercessory prayer highlights the Eucharist—it's known as "loving one's neighbors on one's knees," from which we rise to serve, and many do serve and work for justice impressively.

Our fellow members understand the reasons for our move from a many-stepped four-story house to a stepless high-rise. They spread a farewell lunch that was highlighted for me by words from Bishop Landahl and Pastor Timm plus expressions of our bond by the children. There are tens of thousands of congregations like ours, but ours is ours, and we will carry memory of it and hopes for it in our grateful hearts for all our years.