

The church is a steeple

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Our steeple came down a few weeks ago.

Thankfully, it wasn't a windstorm or a lightning strike that brought it down. A 165-ton crane lifted the steeple off the roof and laid it carefully on the ground.

After 50-plus years on top of our building, the steeple had worn out beyond repair. The whole operation took three days. I spent a good part of that time standing in the parking lot, staring skyward, intrigued not just by the construction equipment but by the history being made before my eyes.

More than one of our church members remembers watching the steeple go up, and here it was coming down. In the intervening years, a lot of church happened underneath: pastors came and went; kids grew up and got married. Dear friends worshiped, loved, celebrated, grieved and served.

Since the construction began, I've been singing this old song I learned as a kid:

The church is not a building.

The church is not a steeple.

The church is not a resting place.

The church is the people.

The people at my church know this, of course. In the course of planning and fundraising for this project, we said repeatedly that it isn't about the steeple itself. The church doesn't exist to have a building; it exists to serve the world. The steeple points us up to the glory of God so that we can be led out in service to our neighbors and our world.

We know it's not about the building. But--and pardon me for quibbling with a children's song--to say that the church is not a building is to underestimate the power of place. To suggest that this steeple doesn't matter is to ignore the 50 years of history that have taken place underneath it.

I've been around here for less than three years. The steeple stood atop the church for 20 years before I was even born, and still I felt the tearing of the fiber of this building as if it were happening to my own body. I felt the whacks of the sledgehammers as if they were digging into my skin. I heard the creaking steel as the top spire was lifted off, and I knew that we were saying goodbye to something we'd never get back.

Things come and go. Buildings, like bodies, wear out. Later this summer we'll celebrate when the new steeple goes up, and someday we'll be telling our grandchildren that we were here when it happened. I'm glad to be part of a congregation that understands the need to let go of the old and make room for the new.

A few days after all the excitement, I was the only one around when the truck came to take away the last dumpster full of debris. "Goodbye, old steeple," I thought, and turned back toward my office.

But it

wasn't really the last of it--one piece remained. The six-foot copper cross that topped the steeple all those years now sits in the foyer. It's dirty and tarnished from half a century of exposure to the elements and the birds. But it stands witness to all the people that made up the church in this time, all the stories that happened here, all the prayers lifted high. Come August, this same cross will be hoisted to the top of the new steeple, where hopefully it will point us toward God for at least another 50 years.

We are

connected to each other--not just by the bonds of Christian fellowship, not just by the way we serve and worship and learn together, but also by the place in which we gather. Sure, the church is the people. But it's also a building, a resting place and a steeple.