

A particular story

By [Diane Roth](#)

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A year ago last June, my husband and I traveled to South Dakota to help celebrate the centennial of one of the three churches I pastored back in the 1990s.

I had not been back in 14 years, though I had thought about them often since leaving. It was a good parish, a farming community out on a prairie unfamiliar to me. It was a gracious place to begin ministry, though sometimes I had critiqued myself, thinking that I had not done enough "big" things while I was there.

I wondered what it would be like, to see them again. I wondered what the community would be like as well. It's not so easy for rural communities these days: with farms getting larger, towns get smaller. I remembered the many funerals, the handful of new members and baptisms, and wondered what it would be like when I returned.

I was pleasantly surprised to see this church, still small, but teeming with children. Some of them were the children of my former confirmation students. Some were faces I didn't know. There was a sense of hope and vitality, a sense of health. Later on, someone told me that in this small congregation (membership is just under 200) there are 57 children in Sunday school this year. The church attracts, particularly young families.

Ever since that summer day, I've been thinking about this congregation, and about the sense of vitality that I found there. I've been thinking about what makes a congregation resilient, able to bounce back when there are challenges rather than continue to contract. I have also been considering that growing congregations are not all necessarily large: there are growing congregations in every size. I wondered if it was DNA or habits or something else that mattered.

Here is what I came up with.

1. This congregation sees each of its pastors as uniquely gifted and uses each pastor's particular gifts. Even mine. So someone came up to me on the Sunday I

visited and showed me a copy of a contemporary worship service I wrote while I was there. They wanted me to know that they still use that service, although they had added to and expanded what I first put together. Every year they purchase a couple more copyrights to favorite songs. Every year the book gets a little thicker. They took the gift I offered them, and they made it their own.

2. This congregation has necessarily become lay driven. This reality is borne out of the challenge that they often got new and first-call pastors who did not stay very many years. But because of that, they have become a lay-driven congregation. I never had all of the ideas. I was just one of the leaders, adding my vegetables to the soup. I had the idea that we should help serve a meal to hungry people at "The Banquet," but there were plenty of other things that happened that had very little to do with me.

3. This congregation is intergenerational by nature. There is no nursery. The children belong to the congregation, and everyone supports and looks after them. The largest service of the year was always Easter sunrise, which the youth group planned and executed every year (no sermon). I was also impressed when the leadership board decided that they should cash in some savings in order to build a lift. They wanted their church basement to be wheelchair accessible. The impetus for this move? A child in the congregation who had muscular dystrophy.

And, most important....

4. This congregation has a particular story. Well, I suppose that every congregation has a particular story, a story that makes them who they are, whether everyone in the congregation even knows it or not.

I didn't learn the story for a long time, and I didn't learn it all at once. I learned first about the cemetery four miles west of the church. Then I would hear references to "The Pleasant Church." Finally I learned that there had once been two churches—the one in town that I knew, and a beautiful old country church west of town, founded by Norwegian immigrants.

One terrible day the country church burned to the ground. I don't know if there is anyone alive yet who remembers the story of the fire, but there were some people who remembered it still when I was pastor. Their voices fell still when they told the story of the fire at their beloved church.

Both churches were still lively and bustling at the time; yet even so, the congregation made the decision not to rebuild but to create a whole new congregation, together with the people of the church in town. The town church was renamed to reflect the belief that they were now a new community.

My telling does not do justice to the particular story of this congregation: the hard work, the hope, the persistence, the joy. It is a story of death and resurrection. It is a story of what happens when the worst thing you can imagine happens—and you find out that it is not the worst thing that can happen to you.

Last fall, a house two blocks from my current congregation burned to the ground. Almost everything was lost. Our faith community, along with others, took a door offering for the woman and her family. When I talked to her on the phone, she said the fire was, "the worst blessing." It was an odd thing to say, but I think I know what she meant.

A particular story. That is what this congregation has: a particular story of "the worst blessing." It has a story that tells them that when the worst happens to them, it is not the worst that can happen to them. It is a story of death by fire, and it is a story of life from God.

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