

What's in a name? Mainliners ponder denominational labels: Mainliners ponder denominational labels

by [John Dart](#) in the [January 25, 2003](#) issue

After attending a conference at Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral seven years ago, leaders of the Lutheran Church of the Master in Sylmar, California, started thinking about changing their congregation's name. The trend of erasing denominational identity from church names had been well under way in the West among independent evangelical and charismatic churches—and with iconoclasts like the famed pastor of the Crystal Cathedral.

“Lutheran” and other Christian terms are confusing to some outsiders, ruminated Sam Platts, a longtime Lutheran pastor in the moderate-income community within the Los Angeles city limits. A few had asked whether Lutheran had something to do with Martin Luther King Jr. And the honorific title for Jesus was unfamiliar too: some mistook it for Church of the “Masters,” of the “Mistress” or of the “Martyrs,” Platts said.

With denominational allegiance waning, and the U.S. routinely described as a religious marketplace, the question of church names arises occasionally for mainline churches. “It always is a topic of discussion among young United Methodist clergy,” who feel the denominational name is a barrier to growth in a postdenominational culture, said Carol Childress of the Dallas-based Leadership Network. However, United Methodist polity requires “United Methodist” to be in a UMC church's legal title.

Even when mainline churches are allowed to skip the institutional name, the rare congregations that do so risk irritating leaders and longtime members. Gradye Parsons, strategic operations director for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly office, said his impression is that the few Presbyterian churches without that identification are those that have relocated, just formed, or merged with a

congregation from another church tradition. It's a nonissue when a bigger question is membership decline, said veteran church consultant Lyle Schaller. "I don't think the mainline bodies pay too much attention to it."

In 1996, Platts said, his 170-member congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had grown stagnant in Sylmar, a relatively unchurched suburban area once called "a graveyard for ministers" by a discouraged Adventist pastor. The congregation bit the bullet and decided upon a name change along with plans to renew the church's look, feel and outreach to young adults.

The 64 nominated names included six using "faith" and 11 having "hope" in the title. The suggestion box also yielded "Ole and Sven's Big Building" and "Please Come to Our Church." The winner: Church of the Foothills. Indeed, stained-glass windows were replaced with clear glass to allow views of the nearby foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. Instead of traditional pews, moveable upholstered chairs were installed. The church's parklike front yard has tables, benches and a fish pond.

"We decided to get rid of 'members' who never came, and got the rolls down to 118 people," said Platts. The biggest growth has come this past year: from 144 in January to nearly 200 by year's end.

Platts admitted to one problem: The fastest-growing group is high school age. Some members complain that "they aren't our kids," said Platts. The minister, 60, raved about 19-year-old Jose Martinez, whose infectious enthusiasm and abilities assisting with the liturgy earned him the approval of the synod bishop to substitute for Platts on his vacation.

A pastor at the congregation for 28 years, Platts said he does not think the ELCA likes the elimination of "Lutheran" at Church of the Foothills (though those ties are evident in church literature and on the congregation's Web site). "They like their churches to be in decline," Platts contended.

Actually, the ELCA has a task force developing an evangelism strategy for the denomination, which holds its biennial convention in August in Milwaukee. Through a church spokesman, the task force leader, Bishop Gary Wollersheim of the Northern Illinois Synod, said that the evangelism strategy does not speak to whether "Lutheran" should remain in a local church's name.

“I, however, personally favor always using the name ‘Lutheran,’” said Wollersheim, “because of our powerful theology of grace and because of our leadership in ecumenical relationships.” He noted that the large Lutheran Services in America is a strong witness to the gospel. “Our desire to be clear as to who we are and what we believe” is also important, he said, in spite of the desire of a few congregations to use self-descriptions they consider “more accessible to the general public.”

Of the ELCA’s 10,777 congregations, only 64 lack “Lutheran” or “ELCA” in their church name, according to the August issue of the *Lutheran* magazine. The most common name was Trinity Lutheran; second and third were St. John and St. Paul. The magazine also reported that the most popular choices by ELCA churches organized in the past ten years often include words like peace, faith, joy, life and hope, but usually along with “Lutheran” in the name.

The large Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona, has been held up as an example of what a nondenominational name could do to help attract worshipers. Platts, however, said that the suburban Phoenix megachurch already had the name Community Church of Joy when it counted no more than 200 members. The church grew after the arrival of a new pastor, Walt Kallestad, in the early 1980s.

In that vein, Michael J. Cox, director of new church planting for the American Baptist Churches, observed, “If you don’t have a good ministry and program, all the name changes won’t help.” In fact, he said, a name change is a low priority. “It would be putting the cart before the horse.”

Dropping the denomination’s name or making other changes—such as calling the church a “center” or “fellowship”—is a trend that first became prominent in western states, and is slow to be discussed in the South or Northeast, Cox said. For a struggling congregation attempting to “restart” or relocate, picking a new name may be an option, he said.

“The issue is probably most relevant to ‘de-churched folk’ who were upset by what their old churches were like,” Cox said. “For the ‘unchurched person’ who is struggling with life and wants a caring community, I don’t think the name of the church is going to matter.” Yet when a name change accompanies a refurbished program, some find it hard to determine how much each change contributed to improvement.

Some liberal or apolitical Baptist churches think about distancing themselves from newsmaking fundamentalist Baptists. In the Chicago area, Cornell Baptist Church, with an activist history on the South Side, changed its name to Ellis Avenue Church in 2001 as it broke with the Southern Baptist Convention. The deciding factor was an SBC statement about wives playing a subservient role in the family; the church joined the moderate Alliance of Baptists. In the northern suburb of Evanston, the openly liberal First Baptist Church changed its name to Lake Street Church of Evanston in 1995.

The church has been transformed, “but not just by changing the name,” said Robert Thompson, pastor since 1980 of the American Baptist congregation. “We didn’t want to say we were Baptists—because of Falwell and the Southern Baptists’ turn to the right,” Thompson said. Along with the name change, the congregation began a “program of transformation” encouraging greater member commitment. “In my first 15 years here, the church had not grown and we had about 80 or 90 people on Sunday morning,” he said. “It’s at about 300 now and we continue to grow.”

Some churches pick names such as Lakeside, Mountain View or Crosswinds as substitutes for the name of a specific city or street, based partly on the notion that some people don’t want to identify with a specific locale. “They want a place name that evokes a sense of peacefulness, although place is still somewhat important,” said Scott Thumma, a faculty associate at Hartford Seminary Institute for Religion Research.

With a sense of marketing akin to corporate research, a conservative congregation may seek to soften its image by switching from “Bible Baptist Church” to “Grace Fellowship.” A Michigan church with 4,000 members changed from Temple Baptist to North Ridge Church three years ago. “People thought that the word ‘temple’ meant that we were some kind of Jewish Messianic Baptist conglomeration,” pastor Brad Powell told the *Detroit Free Press*.

Few Episcopal parishes excise the denominational tag. One exception is the Church of the Apostles in Lexington, Kentucky, which started with five people and now has about 110. It took over a seven-building campus, a former residential complex for people with disabilities, and has a ministry that tries to build bridges between disparate communities.

“Within a mile of us is the largest housing project in the city and one of the most affluent suburbs,” said Martin Gornick, the rector. The church recently received a Lilly grant for pastoral renewal for hosting twice-yearly pastors conferences based on a book on “hospitality” by church member and seminary professor Christine Pohl.

The rector said he was looking for a nontraditional name for the unusual church when his then-bishop, Don Wimberly, now in Texas, came up with “Church of the Apostles.” Operating in the South, Gornick added, “Every once in a while someone asks us if we are Pentecostal or charismatic because the word ‘Apostolic’ is associated with some of those churches.”

Even one of the old nondenominational favorites, “community church,” can cause interpretive difficulties, according to Lyle Schaller. Since its founding by Troy Perry in 1968, the gay-oriented Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches and its expanding network of local congregations have kept that neutral, nondescript name. But among other Protestant churches, Schaller said, “I see now some reluctance to use the word ‘community.’”