

Name-calling: What we call our churches

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

I began my ministry as a “new church development” pastor in a small town in northwest Indiana. The new congregation grew out of an older nondenominational church. When the time came to claim a name for our new adventure, we put together, in fine Presbyterian style, a small committee to study the matter and bring recommendations to the congregation.

I urged the committee to find a name for the congregation with biblical or historical meaning, and not simply follow the traditional Presbyterian custom of calling churches by the street on which they were located or, most common of all, First or Second Presbyterian. The committee listened patiently to their young pastor and assembled a list of names, including Immanuel, Trinity, Hope, Faith—my suggestions—and First Presbyterian—their unanimous choice. When the committee brought the report to the congregation, I made the case for Immanuel. (“God with us”—what more fitting name for our church?) Someone observed that my suggestions sounded pretty Catholic or at least Lutheran. The vote was taken and First Presbyterian won hands down.

Historically, Presbyterians have been the least imaginative of God’s people about naming our churches. I grew up in Broad Avenue Presbyterian Church and have served a Broad Street, a Fourth and a First in addition to a Bethany.

With my memory and curiosity on this matter aroused by [John Dart’s article](#) on church names, I asked the national headquarters of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) how many of its 11,178 congregations are named First Presbyterian Church. The answer staggered me. There are 2,610 of them—almost 25 percent of all PCUSA churches. That’s a lot of unimagination. My guess is that it reflects our ancestors’ antipathy toward Rome. Catholics call their churches Sacred Heart and Blessed Virgin. And Lutherans and Episcopalians adopt names like Trinity or name their churches after saints. Defiant Calvinists made their point by choosing First or Fifth

Avenue.

As Dart observes, the inclination in some quarters now is to drop the denominational designation altogether. I fervently hope that doesn't happen. "Presbyterian" is difficult to spell and it's a lot easier to say simply "Fourth Church." But "Presbyterian" carries a lot of fascinating history, tradition and personality, and so does "Lutheran," "Methodist" and "Episcopal." Besides, I don't see people deciding to go to church or stay away on the basis of a name on the sign out front. That decision is made for other and more important reasons.