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New life for an old church

Did Seminary Avenue Community Church, age 125, die before it was reborn?

By Ben Myers, Staff Writer

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Al Fredrickson started attending Seminary Avenue Community Church in 1940 when he was 2 years old. Although Fredrickson said he's seen "people with big bucks and people with nothing" come and go, he became accustomed to certain constants in the church itself.

A wood cross that hung from the ceiling in the glow of a spotlight.

The organ, which Fredrickson said was refurbished about 30 years ago with money collected at his father's funeral.

The pulpit.

Those fixtures were missing, conspicuously and suddenly, when Fredrickson attended church there Sunday morning. And there were some additions: New furniture in the lobby; refinished wood floors; an extension to the sanctuary, converted out of the old gym.

Josh Hawkins/Staff Photographer
Mark Jobe, lead pastor of New Life Community Church, addresses churchgoers at the grand opening of New Life Lincoln Park, 1110 W. Lill. New Life merged with 125-year-old Seminary Avenue Community Church.

Fredrickson said these and other changes were the most dramatic he'd seen at the church.

But the most significant change was the sign out front. New Life Community Church Lincoln Park is the new name of the church at 1110 W. Lill.

After 125 years-the last 35 with inconsistent attendance, Fredrickson said-Seminary Avenue merged with New Life to save itself.



New Life started in a former mission church on the Southwest Side in 1986, and now operates 10 churches across the city. Lead Pastor Mark Jobe specializes in reaching people who lost touch with their religions in adulthood-"which is the majority of Chicago," Jobe said after Sunday's service.

A younger generation seeking practical meaning in their faith has been alienated by too much of a focus on traditional worship rituals, Jobe said.

"A lot of people are turned off by what they perceive to be the flaws of organized religion-hypocrisy, judgmentalism, irrelevant to life," Jobe said. "There's a whole other dimension of Christianity."

During Sunday's inaugural sermon, Jobe instructed a congregation of 150, many of them in their 20s and 30s, to be "less religious and more spiritually sensitive."

"By religious, I mean sometimes we learn the rituals, and we learn the prayers, and we learn how to sit up and stand, and we learn how to act religious," Jobe continued. "But I never see that in Jesus."

Jobe's sermon was preceded by a seven-piece band that included drums and a fiddle. The music lasted more than 30 minutes, which was more half the service.

Afterward, Fredrickson was blunt.

"I don't like the music," he said. "I'm used to the old hymnal."

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But Fredrickson was equally blunt about the alternative.

"We were getting down to 10 or 12 people on a Sunday, and I was getting worn down and tired," Fredrickson said. "Now we have somebody that's stepping in and not selling to some condo organization."

New Life Lake View Pastor Kevin Bruursema said about half of New Life churches are in older church buildings. Although New Life always envisioned itself as a multi-site church, Bruursema said, it did not set out to become a rehab specialist. Bruursema said he and other New Life pastors noticed a phenomenon they called "dechurchification"-old churches being turned over to private developers.

"Once the space is sold and converted to, say, multi-unit condos, that's it," Bruursema said. "It's been dechurched."

Bruursema said the trend is prevalent in gentrified communities, and he's keeping a list of dechurched spaces in the Lake View-Lincoln Park-North Center areas. He counts 10 so far.

Fredrickson said Seminary Avenue had about 200 members in the 1960s, and attracted 40 to 50 people any given Sunday. He remembers a vibrant social environment, with Boy and Girl Scout meetings in the basement. But then, Fredrickson said, the neighborhood itself started to change.

"People were moving out. There was no kids in the neighborhood for the longest," Fredrickson said. "If you don't have kids in the neighborhood, it just goes down."

Jobe said he thinks dechurchification happens less in the suburbs, which are filled with migrants from the city. A new generation of people, with different spiritual needs, refilled the abandoned neighborhoods and, Jobe said, some churches have failed to adjust.

"The neighborhood has totally changed, but the culture in the church hasn't," Jobe said. "The new generation in the community, they pop in and visit 30 people with gray hair, organ music and a service they don't understand."

New Life churches, according to Jobe, draw more than 3,000 people across the city every Sunday.

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Mark King, Seminary Avenue's former pastor, did not go as far to say that merging with New Life required a leap of faith.

"A step of faith," he said when asked.

King acknowledged that the new services require him to make a personal adjustment. But he also acknowledged that his church needed resuscitation.

"I think most traditions grow out of the reality. There's something real here so people create traditions and celebrate that reality," King said. "The next generations can start to see the tradition as the reality, so throughout church history, people come along and push aside the tradition of the past and get to the heart of it.

"If the reality is there, I'm fine with it either way," King added.

But King said it's challenging to refashion traditions without losing their essence. He was talking about the Bible.

"There can be a tendency to water things down and not use the Bible so much just to get people to come in," King said, referring to evangelicalism. "My belief has always been that if people are really seeking truth and the Bible is God's word, that's what you give."

Sunday's service featured two verses of scripture from Jeremiah. King, retained by New Life as part of an advisory team, said he is confident that scripture will be a more prominent feature once things are up and running.

"That's something I'll always be stressing if I ever feel it's drifting," King said.

Jobe said merging with New Life does not mean the end of Seminary Avenue. The old church, Jobe said, is the new church's forbear. "We never closed this church down," he said. "We inherit all the history."

At Seminary Avenue, that means Fredrickson.

As Jobe stood before churchgoers Sunday, he made it a point to hold up the wood cross that once hung from the ceiling, and to publicly ask Fredrickson how old it is. But not even Fredrickson was sure.

"It's old," Jobe concluded.

Fredrickson said he is excited for the church's future, and was glad to see so many young people. But, he said, he may not be coming every Sunday as he has in the past.

"I'd still like to hear the old hymns," Fredrickson said on Sunday evening. "And I doubt I'll ever hear them there again."

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