

Churches discover brand identification can be a serious detriment

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—For Living Faith Lutheran Church, the name change was as much about the future as the past, as the congregation formally bid goodbye to its old name, Crusader Lutheran Church.

“We’re not saying (Crusader) was a bad name,” Pastor Sandra Cox Shaw said. But now, “our name will no longer be a stumbling block for people who want to visit us and get to know us.”

Lake Pointe Church, a Rockwall megachurch with multiple sites, initially was named West Rockwall Baptist Church and later Dalrock Baptist Church. The congregation dropped the "Baptist" identification from its name several years ago. Church historian Bill Leonard notes many Baptist churches have taken this step because "people are turned off by the Baptist name." (PHOTO/Ken Camp)

Comments about the church’s “militaristic” and “non-Christian” name reached a “critical mass” last year, said Michael Lidell, a former parish lay leader. Concerned about the church’s reputation, Lidell suggested a name change at an administrative meeting in May 2010.

But the process of renaming the church turned out to be complicated. Few

local churches had changed names. So, leaders learned as they went along, hosting town hall-style meetings, learning how to file for a new charter and how to change the website.

After a yearlong process, the 140-member congregation held its “Renaming Celebration” recently.

“We affirm that we go on into the future a newly named entity but with the same mission,” Shaw said.

While Living Faith’s story might be uncommon, it is not unique. The seemingly mundane topic of a church name has become a flashpoint for U.S. congregations, with many renaming themselves in recent years for pragmatic, theological or even cultural reasons.

Some Baptist churches, for example, have removed the “Baptist” from their names, including Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., which now attracts 1,000 worshippers each Sunday to the Fellowship at Two Rivers.

It’s not just a megachurch phenomenon; some smaller Baptist churches remain Baptist, even if it’s not in the name.

“It is an epidemic” said [Bill Leonard](#), professor of Baptist Studies at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., citing the success of nondenominational churches and the lack of Baptist loyalty as driving the trend.

Leonard also noted the Baptist brand has been tarnished by controversial claimants like the anti-gay—and independent—Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan.

“A number of churches on the left and the right are concerned that people are turned off by the Baptist name,” Leonard said. “They believe that in the public square, Baptists have looked shrill, unwelcoming, sectarian.”

Church name changes also can mark a shift in the outlook or message of a congregation. When the First Reformed Church in Allendale, Ala., voted to change its name to Lighthouse Community Church in 2004, large sections of the congregation resisted.

“It didn’t go over well,” said Steve Demers, who became the church’s pastor shortly after the change. He added the church lost about a third of its congregation over the renaming.

More recently, the Lighthouse congregation decided on yet another change—to break away from the Reformed Church in America, a move that Demers said was tied to the earlier name change.

“We wanted the name to say something. Many people won’t attend (Reformed churches) based on preconceptions of what Reformed means,” Demers said. “The whole stigma of denominations has proven divisive.”

The renaming process at Living Faith Lutheran Church also sparked differing opinions in the pews.

“People felt very passionately on both sides of the issue,” Shaw said. “Some felt tied to the name of the church in which their children were baptized and married ... (and some) understood ‘crusade’ as a crusade against poverty and oppression.”

Still, the lure of a new name often wins out. Lidell said Living Faith’s new name “much better reflects what’s happening within our church.”