

In small-town Illinois, a little church says goodbye

July 23, 2024

MOUNT VERNON, Ill. (RNS)—First Baptist Church survived a tornado, church schisms and a pair of worldwide pandemics in its more than a century and a half of ministry in this small Southern Illinois town, about an hour east of St. Louis.

For 156 years, church members gathered to sing hymns, study the Bible and lift each other in prayer. They also ate barbecue, laughed, cried, reached out to their neighbors and cared for one another.

But nothing lasts forever.



The building of First Baptist Church in Mount Vernon, Ill., is now owned by Corem Deo Classical School. (RNS photo/Bob Smietana)

“There is a time for everything,” Ryan Burge, pastor of First Baptist, told his congregation on July 21 as they gathered for the church’s final worship service, reading from the book of Ecclesiastes. “A time for birth and a time for death. A time to build up and a time to tear down.”

For First Baptist, time had run out.

“After being a fixture of Mount Vernon for 156 years, First Baptist Church will no longer exist in the very near future,” Burge told the three-dozen or so worshippers. “And we are all deeply grieved for that moment. It will change our lives, in both big and small ways in the days and weeks to come.”

The church's closing was made official a few minutes later during a brief congregational meeting after the service, when church members voted to close as of Aug. 1. It was a decision that followed years of slow decline.

Years of slow decline

In the late 1990s, the church had about 170 members, down from more than 600 members in the 1960s but still a going concern. By the mid-aughts, when Burge arrived as a 20-something pastor, the church had about 50 members. At closing, there were fewer than 20.

The decline of First Baptist followed a [larger pattern](#) among churches in the United States, where the average congregation's size has shrunk from 137 in 1999 to less than 60 today, according to the Faith Communities Today study. Meanwhile, most people if they attend services go to a larger congregation.

That pattern has played out in Mount Vernon, where small churches like First Baptist have struggled. First Presbyterian Church, for example, shares space with the local Lutheran congregation, while its former building is now a [YMCA](#).

Meanwhile, about a mile south of First Baptist, Central Christian, a non-denominational multi-site congregation, is thriving.



Gail Farnham poses at First Baptist Church, Sunday, July 21, 2024, in Mount Vernon, Ill. (RNS photo/Bob Smietana)

Gail Farnham, who as moderator at First Baptist led the meeting's vote, said small churches like First Baptist are stuck in a dilemma. They can't attract people with the same kinds of programs that larger churches offer.

As a congregation ages, most of the people they know, if they are interested in going to church, already have a place to worship.

Farnham said she had been preparing for the reality of closing the church for years. In 2017, the church gave its building to a local Christian school, with the caveat that the congregation could still meet in the building for worship. That decision, she said, gave the church a few more years of life. It also ensured the building would still be used for ministry even after First Baptist was closed.

She was pleased to see old friends show up for the church's last service and the congregation's last time together.

"I don't feel sad right now," said the 80-year-old Farnham, who first came to First Baptist, which is part of the [American Baptist Churches USA](#), with her family when she was about 5 years old. "I just feel like it's happening the way it should happen."

Many more churches likely will follow

Tens of thousands of local congregations like First Baptist are [likely to close](#) over the next few decades if current trends continue. Their passing will go unnoticed, said Burge, a political science professor at Eastern Illinois University who studies the changing religious landscape.

Burge said that even as the congregation at First Baptist shrank, members were still active in serving their community. From 2008 to 2023, the church provided nearly 55,000 lunches for local schools, with elderly members showing up to volunteer to fill the lunch bags. That dedication renewed his faith, said Burge.



Members of First Baptist Church pose

together for a photo after voting to close the church, Sunday, July 21, 2024, in Mount Vernon, Ill. (RNS photo/Bob Smietana)

“When I believed in God the most is when the two dozen people assembled [here] heard about the idea of the Brown Bag Program and did not hesitate to get involved,” he said in his final sermon, “when I saw members who struggled to stand do everything that they could to help pack those bags; when people gave over and above their tithe to make sure that we always had enough items to feed those hungry kids.”

Burge has long championed the importance of organized religion, for both its spiritual and social benefits. Churches, he argues, host food pantries and shelters, volunteer for disaster relief and provide small acts of kindness that make the world less awful. They care for one another when life gets hard.

That’s something he experienced firsthand growing up. His family struggled to make ends meet, and he recalls boxes of groceries showing up on the family’s porch, provided by members of their church who wanted to lend a hand.

Without that care, he wonders if his family would have made it through those hard times.

“That’s what kept me in religion,” he said in an interview the day before the church’s last service. “There are all these small kindnesses I saw for me and my family. I want to do that for other people.”



Pastor Ryan Burge speaks during the final worship service at First Baptist Church,

Sunday, July 21, 2024, in Mount Vernon, Ill.
(RNS photo/Bob Smietana)

In his last sermon, Burge recounted when a friend told him that First Baptist was lucky to have him as pastor. But his friend was wrong, said Burge, adding that he and his family had received more than they gave in the love and kindness of church members.

He mentioned the church's kindness, in big and small ways—like the meals that showed up after the birth of his children or the time the church paid his family's health insurance when he was laid off during budget cuts at the university back in 2016. He was later hired back.

The church didn't hesitate to help, he said. Burge said that kind of kindness and community can be found at churches around the country—and can't be easily replaced.

Ministry not wasted

In his sermon, Burge—who came to First Baptist as a 20-something graduate student and has stayed for nearly 18 years—said the church's ministry was not wasted, and its legacy would live on.

"It was all worth it," he told the remaining congregants.

Farnham said the church was grateful that Burge had stayed as their pastor. And they are proud of all he has accomplished.

"He is like one of my grandkids," she said.

Lisa Hayse, who grew up in the church, said the congregation's legacy will live on in the memories of people who worshipped there and in students at the Corem Deo Classical School, which now owns the building.

“There will still be hymns sung here,” said Hayse, who now teaches kindergarten at Corem Deo. “There will still be singing to praise the Lord in that sanctuary. It won’t stop.”



The fellowship hall following the final worship service at First Baptist Church, Sunday, July 21, 2024, in Mount Vernon, Ill. (RNS photo/Bob Smietana)

Standing in the church’s fellowship hall—where church members and friends looked at old photos and memorabilia from the congregation’s history and ate pulled pork, mac and cheese and salad, washed down with lemonade and iced tea—Hayse recalled the days when the church’s pews were packed and Sunday school rooms were filled with the laughter of children.

At Corem Deo, she teaches in the classroom where she learned Bible stories as a preschooler. Hayse said her late father had long hoped the church would once again be filled with children. That hope has been realized, she said.

Though the church is closing, the friendships between church members will remain. Farnham plans to send out updates to church members in the coming months and hopes church members will still find time to meet up.

“We are not done with each other,” she said.