



# Churches for Sale

Small congregations struggle to survive amid larger counterparts

*Churches - 2000*

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Sentinel staff photos

**ABOVE:** St. Stephens Lutheran Church in Santa Cruz has opened its doors to members of congregations who have lost their place of worship. **TOP:** Christian Life Center Church in Soquel, left, and Light of Light Church in Scotts Valley, center, have recently been sold and no longer operate as churches. Christian Life Center Church, right, in Soquel remains on the market.

By **HEATHER BOERNER**  
Sentinel staff writer

## SANTA CRUZ

## Churches eager to open doors to new members

**T**he Rev. Jim Lapp of St. Stephens Lutheran Church had something to say to his congregation last Sunday, his first behind the pulpit since going on a six-month sabbatical. What he had to say was this: Open your doors, open your hearts to the "unchurched." Bring them among you and share the beauty of the Lord. This is more than a wish. This is what

local churches must do if they want to survive, say church leaders like Lapp. "It's been seven years of ups and downs, and at times I've wondered how long we would make it," he said. "It's true everywhere. We have people who are grieving the close of a church, we have people who are moving out of the area because they can't afford to live here." Seated three rows back from the pastor, Kent Madsen feels Lapp's message

perhaps more deeply than others in the room. A large man with a jubilant spirit, Madsen sits holding his wife's hand and nodding.

The couple, along with perhaps another dozen people in the church, have come to St. Stephens, to this service, as a sanctuary from a struggle they recently lost — the struggle to keep their small church in Scotts Valley open.

Light of Light Lutheran Church closed earlier this year, Madsen says, for the same reason people lose houses: they couldn't pay the mortgage.

Three churches have been sold in Santa Cruz County in the past year, and almost a

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dozen have been sold since 1997. Almost all the churches faced shrinking church-going populations and increasing expenses. Many of these struggling churches either merged with larger churches or went out of business altogether.

Besides Light of Light Lutheran Church, the Christian Life Center churches in Aptos and Scotts Valley have been sold in the past year. Those congregations have consolidated with the Christian Life Center church in Santa Cruz.

Members say closing is the most financially responsible thing to do; It allows the denomination, as a whole, to survive.

With a \$1.1 million mortgage and only about 60 families attending regularly in Scotts Valley, Madsen, his wife and the others who were at the heart of the Light of Light community, had to make that decision: sell the church while keeping their faith.

"The church is the people," said Thora Bautz, whose deck the Light of Light church was first conceived on. "But you can still mourn a building."

Of the churches that have sold in the last year, none have reopened, at least as churches.

Light of Life will reopen as the Scotts Valley Community Center. The Christian Life Center Church in Scotts Valley has reopened as a Montessori school. And the fate of the Christian Life Center Church in Soquel, which is currently for sale for the second time, is unclear.

## Bigger is better

All this points to the difficulty of keeping a small church afloat, says Bruce McGuire, an appraiser in the county for three decades who specializes, in part, on churches.

McGuire traces the trend of small church struggles back to 1997, when a glut of churches first went on the market.

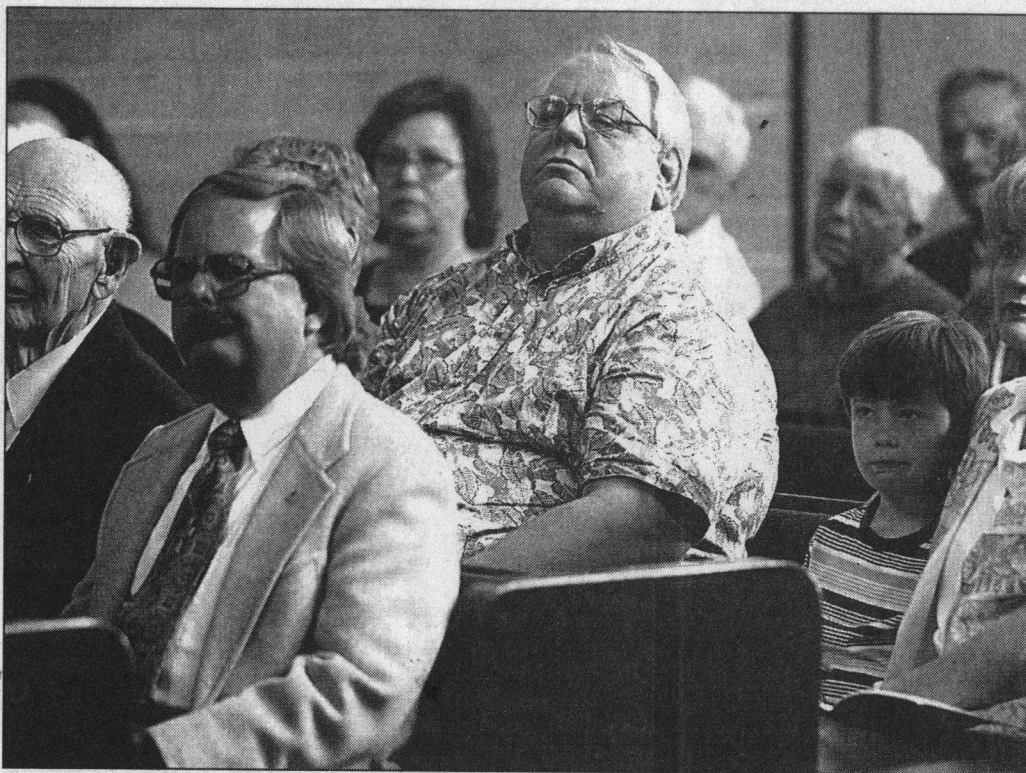
"There is something happening right now," he said. "We are seeing a lot of shifting in churches, and we are seeing more than normal sales."

Statistics show that county churches serve few county residents and, most say, fewer than they've served in the past.

A recent informal survey conducted by Vintage Faith Church found that 90 percent of county residents don't attend a church on a regular basis. Many local pastors agree that the number of people not regularly attending church is high.

Dan Kimball, who was pastor of Santa Cruz Bible Church for 13 years and is now pastor of the burgeoning Vintage Faith Church — a sister church of Santa Cruz Bible — focuses his attention on young people, and for good reason.

He says the future of the church rests on teenagers and young adults. The number of these people going to church now is dwindling more than other population segments, Kimball says — a trend he's



Kent Madsen, center, attends services at St. Stephens Lutheran Church. Madsen came to St. Stephens after his Scotts Valley church closed earlier this year.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

hoping to reverse. And so far, he's had some success.

While some churches are struggling for survival, Vintage Faith Church, which is an evolution of Graceland Ministries, has at least 800 members who attend regularly.

Kimball says he's seen churches change, close and reform in his time in Santa Cruz County. A lot of the sales happening now, he says, can be explained using a simple economic model: Smaller chapels are merging to offer services similar to those available at larger churches such as Santa Cruz Bible and Twin Lakes Church.

"Larger churches end up being able to offer a lot of different specialized ministries that smaller churches aren't able to, such as having a full time pastor dedicated to junior hires," he said. "In many ways, large churches become like Wal-Marts having something for everyone in one store, and they can be so much more convenient for people."

"However, some of the most beautiful things can happen at small churches," he added. "They can have much more a family-like feel to them, and (it's) a lot easier to build relationships."

Fred Hennes is the pastor of one church that is a product of a merger.

Two years ago, Scotts Valley Bible Church and Granite Creek Community Church ceased to exist, but they combined and became Gateway Bible Church. Scotts Valley Bible Church gave up its rented quarters and joined with Granite Creek Community Church.

The denominations were different and their approaches were different, but Hennes says the partnership worked.

"If you have 100 or less parishioners, the cost of doing business can just sink you," he said. "It probably costs about \$1 million to run a church, between paying

a pastor, keeping an office open and office staff. How can 70 people support that? It's a reality that really hurts small churches."

That's exactly what happened to Light of Life Church, members say. Kent Madsen describes the last few years of his church's existence as a constant struggle to keep the doors open.

The church had a \$1.1 million loan, but after 18 years of worship, the association that made the loan wanted their money. But the church members, which Bautz says numbered about 60 families, couldn't afford to pay.

So they sold the church, and many regrouped at St. Stephens Church. During an adult class before Sunday services recently, Chris and Kent Madsen told the family's story of faith — a faith that was tested mightily by the closing of Light of Life.

"It's a challenge to the faith, to try to figure out what God's will is," he said. "And how to figure out why God's will seemed to be one way and now seems to be different. I just have to accept it and be open to listen to what God has in store for me next."

"And I remember a great quote I got from (former Light of Life pastor Bonnie Bell) that said, 'Don't cry because it's over; smile because it happened.' It's hard to get to that point of where you're open to what's next."

His wife, Chris, shook her head and sighed.

She wiped away tears. Kent gently patted his wife's leg consolingly. Others in the room, also former parishioners of Light of Life, wiped tears from their eyes.

## Winning new worshippers

Light of Light had begun to reach out to

new members, but in retrospect, they did so too late.

The targets of their recruiting efforts, in the faith community, are called the "unchurched." Like the unhoused or the unfed, they are people the faithful see as needing just that one extra push to join a church.

Chris Tury was one such unchurched woman who began attending Light of Life in the last few years.

She loved it, she says. And now that that church is gone, she says she's committed to continuing to attend church, even though she hasn't found a perfect fit yet.

Finding the right church and attracting people who don't attend church on a regular basis is one of the primary challenges in a county where so few people make church a priority.

This is what Fred Hennes has succeeded at doing.

When Hennes became the first pastor of Gateway Bible Church in Scotts Valley, there were about 120 members. Now there are about 300 with plans to add more buildings and services, thanks to some new programs and Hennes's approach.

He says he draws on his years as an engineer in the technology industry and his life before he entered the church in the 1990s to help people identify with him and the Christian journey of faith.

The key, he says, is to have people accept your approach to faith. Every church has a different approach: It's in their interpretation of the Bible, their approach to ministry and the way they hold their services and which hymns they sing.

He says in any church, about 80 percent of the parishioners accept the approach, while the other 20 percent drift between

churches, looking for the right match. It could be the 20 percent drifting away from a small church that dooms it, he adds.

Vintage Faith Church's Kimball, with a rockabilly music sensibility and passion for faith that have made him one of the most prominent pastors in the county and author of two books, is taking his message to wherever young people might find it. That means on the Web and to downtown Santa Cruz.

While other churches are struggling, Kimball is looking to expand. A parishioner at the church who wishes to remain anonymous has promised to buy a downtown building for Vintage Faith, where the church can have office space, an art gallery, a cybercafe and other services that will appeal to young people.

Kimball was eyeing the Palookaville building, but found that it wasn't for sale, only lease. So his search continues.

Only after a downtown base is established will he look for a chapel in which to hold services. Until then, services will continue to be held on Sunday nights at Santa Cruz Bible Church.

While he's looking for a building and Madsen has just lost one, Kimball voiced a belief shared by both men.

"Church is not a building," he said. "You can't go to church. You carry the church with you. It's in everything you do. And that changes how you live your life."

Rene Schlaepfer has other ideas for attracting members.

Schlaepfer is the pastor of Twin Lakes Church, in Aptos, a church with 3,000 members that 10 years ago had a membership of 700 people. What it took to get his church turned around was support from all the members, a flurry of new programs and a new style of worship. The church projects hymns onto screens around the large, light-colored stage of the sanctuary.

The church now offers ministries for everyone from preschool students to seniors and high school students to adult women. Child care is available for every program that caters to adults.

What the church has done, he says, was create "multiple ports of entry," or many ways people can be connected to the church.

He says he's realized that in Santa Cruz County, churches are looking to attract a whole new type of worshiper.

"In the 1950s, churches were attracting healthy, churched people," he said, standing outside one of the classrooms that flank the auditorium-sized sanctuary.

"But if we get new members here, often they are wounded. And what they are wounded by, often, is past church experiences. Part of what we need to do as a church now is to offer words of consolation and be sensitive to their experiences."

Contact Heather Boerner at [hboerner@santa-cruz.com](mailto:hboerner@santa-cruz.com).