

Change the world one idea at a time

“Father Joe, I went to my funeral last week!” said Liz. Now I’ve been part of a lot of funerals. And I’ve talked to a lot of people. But I’ve never talked to anyone who attended his or her own funeral!

“How did you attend your own funeral?” I asked.

“Well,” Liz said, “I always wondered what people would say about me after I died, so I decided to schedule a ‘funeral reception’ to invite people to. I had lots of food. And then I sat and listened to the kinds of things people were saying about me.”

“Then,” Liz added, “I took up a collection!”

“You made money off your own funeral?” I asked. “Yep,” she replied. “Then I gave all the money I collected to Our Daily Bread. I collected over \$2,600!”

Isn’t that a great idea? What a great way to literally ‘die to ourselves’ so that others might live. Death is inevitable. Celebrating our deaths in such a way that it gives life to others is truly creative. Liz had her ‘funeral’ in the parish hall at St. Charles Parish in Pikesville. More than a hundred people attended.

Liz Turnbaugh, as you might imagine, is not your typical parishioner. St. Charles is not your typical parish. Liz is a little past 80 years old (I have to protect her age lest I hasten my own funeral). St. Charles is just more than 160 years old, almost exactly double Liz’s age.

Imagine all that has happened over 160 years. Think of the Masses said, sacraments administered, weddings performed, faith-filled lives sustained!

I had the privilege of being a part of St. Charles in the mid 1970s, along with Monsignor Martin Schwalenberg, Father Stan Janaites and Father George Rothen. Those were the days when the parish was booming. The school was alive and well. We had three evening Masses every Saturday, and four more Masses on Sunday. Liz was part of the ‘gang of four’ who counted the collection at the rectory every Monday, along with Vicky Rote, Pat Long and Julia O’Connell. Note that Liz is still

counting money! It's in the blood.

Although the numbers have decreased, St. Charles is still a vibrant community of wonderful people, led by their pastoral lay director, Sister Edna Maier, S.N.D., and Father Ray Chase as the sacramental minister. St. Charles celebrates its past but still looks to the future with energy and vision. With people like Liz Turnbaugh how can it not?

When Robert Schuller would be praised by others for building his famous Crystal Cathedral, he would reply: "The greatest churches have yet to be built!" His ministry inspired countless other mega churches. But he knew that Christianity didn't just look back. It always looked to the future to bring the Gospel message to people unchurched and unborn.

It's easy to become negative today comparing some of our parishes today with the 'glory days' of the past. But the past is not meant to haunt us with ghosts of discouragement. The past is meant to inspire us with dreams big enough only for the Holy Spirit.

If the greatest churches have yet to be built, so, too, the greatest ideas have yet to be shared. Liz is an example of someone with an idea that will inspire countless others and will touch countless lives. Our job is not just to build buildings to house God's presence and God's people, but to build dreams that will set God's Spirit free to fill the earth. A single thought can change our lives. A single good idea can change the world.