

PTS ALUMS PLANT CHURCHES IN PITTSBURGH

A LABORATORY FOR CREATIVE MISSION

INNOVATIVE WORSHIPING COMMUNITIES ARE FLOURISHING THROUGHOUT PITTSBURGH PRESBYTERY

By Sue Washburn '12

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New churches are like the research and development arm of the presbytery, says Vera White, Pittsburgh Presbytery’s director of new church development. It’s virtually impossible to find a neighborhood in Pittsburgh that doesn’t already have a Presbyterian church or two, yet the presbytery has found that investing spiritually and financially in new ministries can benefit all of its congregations.

“We realized that if we wanted to reach people for Christ, we had to relearn how to plant churches,” White says. “It has been transformational for us. Church planting brings new life to the presbytery. We aren’t battenning down the hatches; we are giving people resources and permission to try new things.”

White insists that existing congregations should not view new churches as competition, since new church developments don’t usually draw from existing congregations. New churches don’t have to fight longstanding traditions that can hamper the outreach of established congregations. They are free and flexible—and inspired.

ART AND OUTREACH

The Open Door, which describes itself as “a missional church community,” uses art created by its own member artists to tell the story of Jesus Christ. This new congregation is housed in an old church building that had fallen into disrepair. The space now holds classes in pottery and stained glass in addition to worship. Open Door’s identity reflects its location in a neighborhood that is home to a growing number of artists. Brandon James “B.J.” Woodworth, pastor of the Open Door, says he is thankful for the opportunity to participate in shaping a church from the ground up.

Eugene Blackwell, organizing pastor of another new ministry, House of Manna, says he was called to leave a traditional church to work more closely with people on the streets. He describes House of Manna as a diverse congregation where a professional might sit with a prostitute and where both law-makers and lawbreakers can find peace in Christ.

“I’d rather have a church full of people who are just discovering Christ than established Christians who are set in the way that they do church,” Blackwell says. “With a new church, you don’t have barriers to break down. Tradition is a powerful force that can sometimes get in the way of transformation.”

House of Manna’s vision is fueled by faith in God the provider. Just as God provided manna for the Israelites to eat in the desert, members believe Christ will provide for their congregation. And the congregation in turn will provide evidence of God’s love in Homewood, a community that is full of need.

Daveon Collier learned of House of Manna’s commitment to the community firsthand. “God, Eugene and the House of Manna just don’t

give up on you,” he says as he recounts his story of transformation. “I was a kindhearted drug dealer—the kind that knew it was not what I should be doing, but I didn’t know what else to do. Eventually, I got caught. I think that my time in jail was God’s way of getting me to really look at myself.”

Collier says Blackwell stood by him for six years while he got his life together. Today, Collier is in charge of outreach for House of Manna. He meets with corporate leaders and grant distributors as well as with people on the streets of Homewood.

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BIBLE STUDY AND BIG IDEAS

A few miles away, Chris Brown and Michael Gehrling are co-pastors of the Upper Room, a new church development in Squirrel Hill, a community that is home to a large Jewish population as well as university professors and students from around the world. The Upper Room is within walking distance of delis and pizza joints, hobby shops and coffee shops. It’s not uncommon to hear several languages spoken on the streets around the church.

Leaders and members of the Upper Room intentionally use the word church to describe who they are and what they do. “Many people in the emerging church movement have been hurt by the church, and so there is a lot of ‘pushback’ against that word,” Brown explains. “We see the faults of the church, but we seek to recover the church as a place of healing.”

The Upper Room is a church that cares not only about Jesus but also about big ideas and world affairs—an approach to faith that matches its neighborhood. Upper Room celebrates the Eucharist every Sunday as a way of coming together around Christ’s table.

Unity is also an emphasis at Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community, a recently chartered congregation. Since organizing the church in 2004, leaders of Hot Metal Bridge have sought to promote Christian unity through dialogue.

“We have intentionally been trying to be a church of dialogue when there is no agreement on the issues,” pastor Jeff Eddings explains. “It’s a difficult place to be, but I believe we are called into it. The Holy Spirit is trying to teach us to love each other in the midst of our differences.”

A unique setting for dialogue is the church’s Bible Fight Club, which meets in a tattoo parlor. While the name makes it sound like a raucous shouting match, this Bible study group has rules that encourage active listening and respectful responses.

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While most of Pittsburgh’s new church developments have focused on building community in particular neighborhoods, the needs of ethnic communities were behind the formation of the African Christian United Fellowship and the Pittsburgh Vietnamese Presbyterian Fellowship.

When Bakatampa Malu Mutombo came to Pittsburgh in 2002, he and a group of African families decided to create a church especially for African immigrants. Having immigrated to the United States from Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 1995, he is fluent in English as well as French, Swahili, Lingala and Tshiluba. Pastor Malu, as he is called, uses his language gifts to welcome immigrants from a variety of African nations who worship together in his congregation.

Similarly, the Vietnamese fellowship was organized by Vietnamese Christians living in Pittsburgh who were seeking a place to worship and to practice their faith using their own traditions and language.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AT WORK

Pittsburgh is not a city with rapid growth or an influx of young families. The “build it and they will come” approach to new churches just isn’t applicable to the environment. So Pittsburgh Presbytery’s leaders attribute their success with new church development to the work of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives rather than to smart expansion plans.

“One of the things we’ve learned is that when the presbytery thinks, ‘We need a church there,’ it doesn’t work,” White says. “What does work is coming alongside someone who is passionate, committed, inspired and involved” and supporting that person’s vision to launch a new ministry.

One way the presbytery encourages new endeavors is through its relationship with Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, which now offers an M.Div. degree with a church planting emphasis. Recent graduate Sally Henry is considering starting a new congregation.

“I see God building real excitement, enthusiasm and a wave of hope within our denomination,” she says. “Pastors and leaders are being given the freedom to try new things. Despite everything else going on in our denomination right now, I hear God saying, ‘This isn’t the beginning of the end—this is a new creation.’ That’s what God does best!”

New churches can inspire leadership among the younger generations. Michael Gehrling recalls a conversation with a young man who volunteered to be on the finance team of the Upper Room.

He had no experience in accounting or expertise in dealing with money. In any other church, there would almost certainly be older, more experienced, more qualified people to handle this work,” Gehrling says. “New churches provide opportunities for leadership to people who wouldn’t be entrusted with the same level of responsibility in established churches.”

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