

Permit me to begin with an autobiographical story. Shortly after I arrived in Charlotte, N.C., as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, as I walked to my car to drive home, as never before I realized where the church and I were: We were in the heart of a city that was growing older. Buildings that once had been a hotel, a department store, and a restaurant stood empty or boarded up. There were homeless and hungry people nearby. This location should affect who and what the congregation and I were, did, and became in the years to come.

Our subject for Vacation Bible School as given to us by William and Paul is *What is required of a downtown church?* This is the same question that came to my mind that evening, long ago, in Charlotte.

There are many answers that can be given. One is that such a church must intentionally seek new members - i.e. seek new people who feel the call of Jesus Christ to follow Him, so as to be engaged in the ministry that **was** His and now is **ours**. If we do not have the support of new people, who replace those who are no longer with us, regardless of our intentions and commitment, we will be unable to extend the assistance and love of Christ to those around us. The church and Christ's ministry through the church in our little slice of the world will die.

Secondly, a downtown congregation must always be open to new and untried methods of meeting the needs of those around us. Never can we be content with the ways we have served God's people in the name of Christ in the past. Always we must be open and receptive to new ways of helping people in His name.

Before moving to Charlotte, I had been the pastor of a church in Fairfax County - which is just South of the Potomac River and Washington D.C.

In the years that I had been outside D.C., the County was experiencing unprecedented growth. What was true of the County was also true of our church. Each week I was given a fist full of visitor cards, with most people indicating they were interested in joining the church. It was not anything I was saying or doing, nor was it anything the congregation was doing to cause such remarkable growth. If all the officers had stood at the door with a broom saying "We don't want any new members", they would still have found a way to visit and join. One of the hardest jobs I had each week was finding the streets these newcomers had given as their address. Their

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addresses were not yet shown on any map I could find. Because of this unique situation the Volunteer Fire Department became an invaluable resource in my ministry. Unlike members of the Professional Fire Department, the Volunteers took time to find on their map the streets I named and, then, in some detail and with great patience, would tell me how to get to them. To illustrate my point of rapid numerical growth, let me say that, each month we averaged receiving approximately 20 new families coming into the church family.... **This will not happen in a downtown church in the 21st century!**

Because of such growth, in Fairfax County an essential part of the church's ministry became that of intentional and carefully planned assimilation of new brothers and sisters in Christ who had

offered to join their forces with ours. Intentionally the congregation had to welcome them, help them discover their unique interests and God given talents, so that they could effectively join in our united attempt to follow Christ.

Churches in downtown locations (as the church in *any* location) must develop and constantly seek to improve its ministry of Christian education. Many new members in Fairfax County who came to join us in being faithful followers of Christ did not have a background in the Presbyterian Church. This is even more true now than in the past. Denominations are not as sharply defined now as in the past. New and experienced church members must continue to grow in understanding the gospel: the grace of God in the lives of us all. We must make use of the examples of ministry that Jesus gave the church in the first century to determine what we should do in the twenty first century. Bible study should not be an end in itself. It should encourage each of us to reach deep within so as to respond to the needs of people around us today in the twenty first century as Jesus responded to the needs of people around Him in the first century.

Downtown congregations must also have an outstanding music ministry, which invites and encourages new persons into at least one of its many choirs. We should attempt to develop and support the most inviting - and most beautiful! - ministry of music of any congregation in our city.

Downtown churches are usually the oldest congregation of a particular denomination, therefore they are frequently looked upon as a type of

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“cathedral church.” This means that they will be expected to *interpret* and if possible to *support* the decisions and action of the larger church.

Fellowship activities which appeal not to all - but to many - members should

also be encouraged and supported. Those of us who feel comfortable and at home in the church must remember that students and adults coming to a downtown church do not know each other as if they came from a common school or community. For instance, here at FPC Knoxville, several high schools are represented in its Senior fellowship programs. When intentionally encouraged strong ties can be built among students from very

different schools. Looking back at the experiences and development of my three children, it is interesting that their longest, and most enduring friendships have not come from among their school friends but from among their church friends.

It seems to me that when put together so as to support each other these ministries form the backbone of what a downtown church must be and do.

Not all ministries will be of interest or appeal to all members; the important thing is that all members be able to find at least one ministry which encourages them to become involved.

Allow me now to return to the first responsibility mentioned: Intentionally seeking and encouraging new members to express themselves with us in serving God. Replenishing those members who die, move away, or for any of a host of reasons are removed from the active membership of the church.

After moving to a downtown ministry, the first thing I learned was that my experience in a suburban church in Fairfax County would **not be true** of my experience in a downtown congregation. Newcomers to the community would not stand at the door knocking for admission. Nevertheless, the need of additional, committed, Christian helpers to carry on the work that has been given to us the name of Christ is greater in a downtown church than anywhere else. From my perspective and experience as a pastor in downtown churches for nearly forty years, new laborers to work with us in becoming who God asks to become, and in doing what God wants us to do, are needed in a downtown church as nowhere else!

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One of the ways of creating the larger community's interest in what is happening in a church is that of developing a signature ministry - such as our Community School of the Arts. Children who otherwise would have no opportunity to learn how to play the piano or any other musical instrument, adults and children who find new and exciting ways of portraying through art what they see and feel inside, or who are given a new (or first time) opportunity to sing in a choir, to dance, or to glorify God through their unique God-given talent often find this to be a turning point in life. Frequently I have seen children change so as to become new people, when they find a way of expressing what lies deep within. Some people are meant to be scholars, others excel in athletics, but many children need help in finding and nurturing their talent(s) in the arts.

Being in the downtown, where buses intersect with other forms of transportation, where most residents of a city can relatively easily find their way to our church buildings, gives us a unique responsibility to reach out in the name and with the love of Jesus Christ - not so as to call attention to our goodness but to help others find their talent or God given gift.

Awkward, challenging situations have a way of uniquely presenting themselves in downtown churches. Their buildings are usually the most expensive to maintain, and despite the best effort of church members roofs still leak, and - it seems - buildings forever creak... But I would not choose to be a pastor anywhere else.

As I frequently said in Charlotte: Look outside and you will find an assortment of people passing by unlike a group of people found anywhere else. The view from a downtown church is like that from the Jericho Gate of Jerusalem. With time a representative of each group within society passes by: The federal judge and a homeless person; the wealthiest man in the city and someone begging for a meal. Such variety within a church is one of its greatest resources. It supplies a unique opportunity for all to learn from each other and as never before to grow in the likeness of Christ.

It is a downtown congregation's greatest joy and responsibility to reach out to assist all people in this rich and varied assortment of humanity, in the name and with the love of God as found in the study of the Bible's record of Jesus' life and ministry!