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The Reverend Deborah Fae Swift, *Pastor*

## The *Acts of Faith* Model of Ministry of South Presbyterian Church

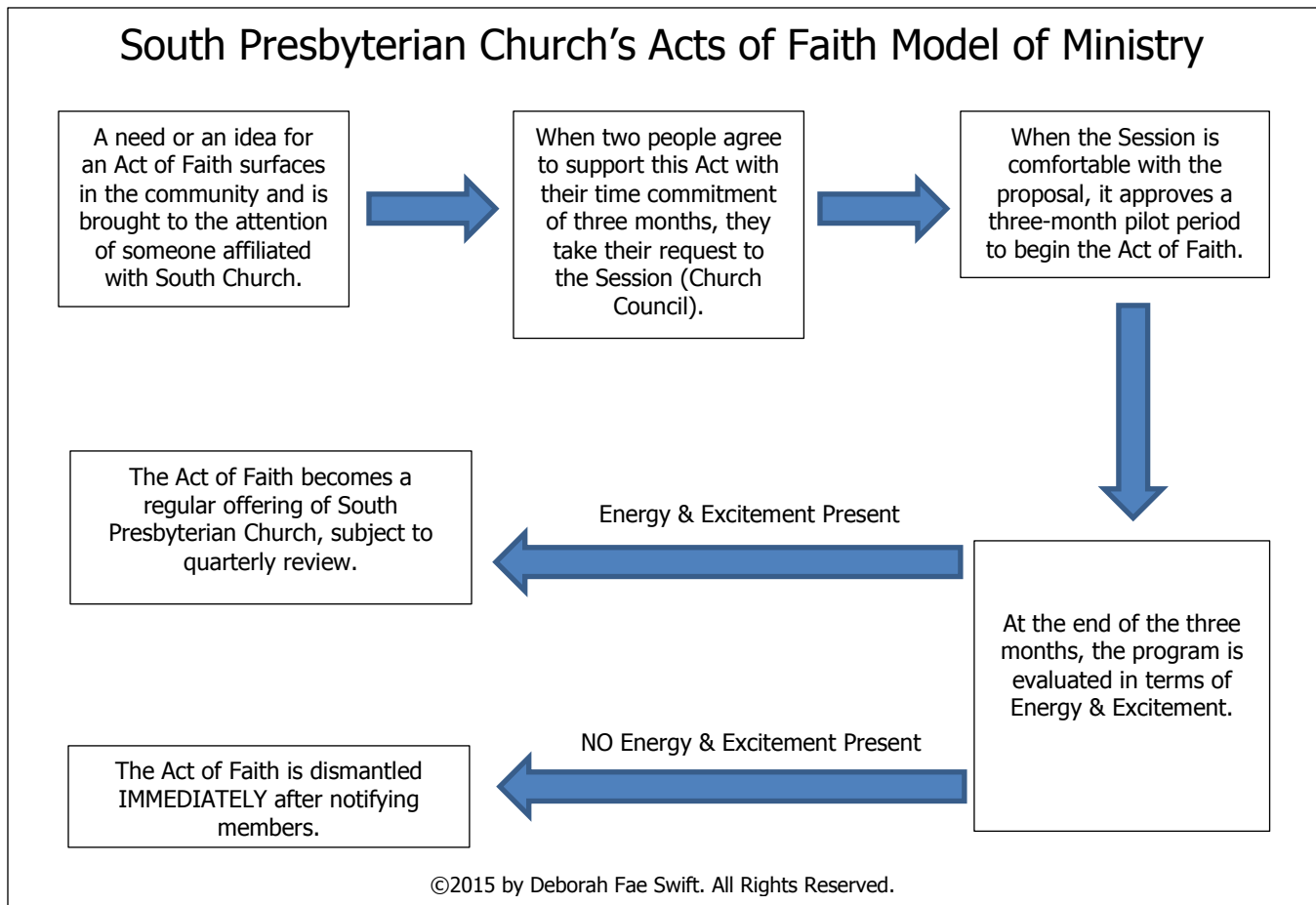
How does one measure the success of a church?

For some, success is gauged by Sunday attendance; for others, it is reflected in endowments and budgets. Yet neither of those is particularly useful for small congregations (fewer than 100 members) who represent the greatest portion of mainline Christian churches in the United States today.

South Presbyterian Church, a small, urban congregation in Rochester, New York with a history dating from the 1840's, has been pioneering a different model of ministry since 2010. The *Acts of Faith* Model of Ministry, where program development begins with looking at what *is* working and generating "energy and excitement" rather than tweaking "what we've always done," has produced a vibrant congregation whose rippling effects move throughout the city.

It is a bold, unconventional, and creative re-visioning of church transformation and development that is catching fire in Rochester. This model can easily be replicated elsewhere when a few changes are made to the ways in which ministry is defined and implemented.

The *Acts of Faith* model at a glance:



## ***Theological Foundation:***

*Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally. Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."*

(Matthew 28:16-20, *The Message*)

For those of us who believe that the Great Commission<sup>i</sup> was a command from Jesus and not merely a request, the definition, realization, and embodiment of the word "church" becomes both a transformative agent and the end result of transformation, itself. The Book of Acts speaks of the development of the early church when believers met in non-institutionalized settings and created community, table fellowship, care for widows and orphans, and exercised mutual concern for each other.

Applying those same principles to today's 21<sup>st</sup> century faith community has led South Presbyterian Church, a proud member of the PC(USA), to adopt a missional identity and abandon our century-old attractional model; if we are to "go out and train everyone ... in the practice of all that [Jesus] commanded," then we are not to be setting ourselves apart in a centralized location expecting people to come to us for their needs to be met. We are sent to listen and respond, not to remain in one location, deciding for someone else what they need.

The church of Jesus and his followers began as a grassroots movement and therein lies the greatest promise for its continuation today; it is grassroots organizations that are most "directly and immediately responsive to the needs and wishes of the people involved,"<sup>iii</sup> a focus strikingly similar to that of the missional church.

Additionally, throughout his ministry, Jesus brought healing and wholeness, the perfect *Shalom*, to those he encountered. He traveled as an itinerant Rabbi, spreading the good news that God's reign was in their presence, that God's love was accessible to all. Whether people requested a specific healing, asked theological questions of him, or just attended his public events *en masse*, Jesus and his followers offered a presence that challenged old beliefs, defined a new way of being in relationship with God, and became the voice of the voiceless as he and his followers stood with the marginalized of their day.

It is this practice that South Church embraces and strives to emulate through the *Acts of Faith* Model of Ministry.

In some instances (such as Bible Study or Sunday Worship) the church's presence may be overtly religious and clearly visible and identifiable as "church" in a traditional sense. In other instances (such as lawn mowing, a community choir, or meeting at a diner to discuss the latest best-seller) the church's presence may be less identifiable as what we have all grown up to think of as "church." We at South believe, however, when we are present, folks have the opportunity to "bump up against Jesus" when they interact with people of faith. Being present with others allows us to be the hands and heart, the hugs and healing presence of Christ's love, acceptance, and joy in the world.

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***The essence of the Acts of Faith Model of Ministry is quite simple: go where we are needed and share the loving presence of the Risen Christ.***

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We, at South, believe that God's Presence is not limited to time and place, nor to holy words and sacred songs; the presence of the Holy Spirit is made manifest in people of faith even when they may not be aware that they are being used for that purpose. Intentionally living, working, moving, and being with others deepens our own faith, and every time we demonstrate what it is like to try and live a spirit-centered, Jesus-modeled life in 21<sup>st</sup> century North America, we are living as the Body of Christ – we are "being church."

### ***How this model came about:***

In 2010-2011, South Presbyterian Church launched its *Acts of Faith* (AoF) Model of Ministry with three groups: Bagels & the Bible (Bible study at the local bagel place on Saturday morning), Food for Thought (community book group that meets Friday afternoon at the local diner), and CLASS ACT (Christian Leadership And Senior Spirituality – Applied Christian Teaching which meets at a nearby senior living community). During the intervening years other *Acts of Faith* were started, some of which were set aside and deemed not viable, while others continue; today, some groups are overtly religious (Prayer on the Lawn) while others have no mention of God, Jesus, or church but continue to build community (Mt. Hope World Singers).

In 2014, the thirty members of South Church sold their building in order to be able to better respond to the needs of local citizens without the worry of financing ongoing building maintenance.

Perhaps the most innovative use of space for our *Acts of Faith* is Sunday Worship which takes place at St. John's Meadows, a senior living community one mile from our original church building and the site of our CLASS ACT group. For two years the Meadows had been searching to find a church that could provide weekly worship to their residents. When South Church was selling its building, they approached us with an invitation to locate our weekly Sunday worship there and open it to both their residents and the larger Rochester community.

### ***How this model works:***

The resultant *Acts of Faith* Model of Ministry has included the development of what others would call mission outreach programs. To us, the term "outreach programs" gives the impression of standing in one place and reaching out (and often down) to people who we perceive "need" us. *Acts of Faith* grow out of the grassroots needs of the community and empower their participants to lead and eventually administer the programs themselves. AoF's are organic in nature, springing up in the very location where the needs occur. They can be requested by a community member or by someone in the church who "has an idea" that s/he wants to try.

By our definition, an *Act of Faith* is a neighborhood-based, grassroots, non-pastor-driven activity of South Presbyterian Church that praises God by building community through worship, education and the arts.

South's *Acts of Faith* occur in multiple community locations. Because we are missional and not attractional, we go where the people are who desire the AoF. The church goes to them – they do not have to come to us. Wherever possible and practical, the AoF chooses *not* to meet in a church building because of the negative association many people feel with

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***The first precept is that each Act of Faith occurs in the context of the larger community – at a diner, a coffee shop, a psychiatric center, a senior living community, or similar gathering place.***

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organized religion and because we are endeavoring to model “church” as extending beyond the walls of a traditional faith center.

From the outset, South Church has been clear that ours is not a “pastor-driven” ministry; our pastor serves as coordinator, innovator, supporter, administrator, and teacher, but it is the responsibility of the entire Body of Christ to minister through our *Acts of Faith*. We require that the pastor be an ordained Teaching Elder (ie, Minister of Word and Sacrament) because some of our *Acts of Faith* contain the administration of the sacraments, and we believe it important to safeguard our Reformed Tradition: *The Church Reformed, Always Reforming*.

By virtue of our baptismal covenants, we are all guaranteed the gifts needed to be an active member of the Body of Christ<sup>iii</sup>. While some people are ordained to certain positions within the institutionalized church, the ability to discern, lead and actively participate in ministry is open to all. Therefore, our goal is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

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*The second precept is that an Act of Faith strives to be member-led.*

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Two individuals (at least one of whom must be affiliated with South Church) agree to work on a particular Act of Faith for an initial three-month pilot period while a member of the Pastoral Staff supervises, coaches and trains the AoF’s members to assume the mantle of responsibility for group leadership so it does not remain pastor-dependent.

South Presbyterian Church stands upon the theological belief that everything has the potential to be holy and sacred because God is present in all things. Applying that concept to our *Acts of Faith* Model of Ministry, we believe that *everything* is eligible to be an Act of Faith – Sunday worship, book group, church choir ... everything. And in this model, each Act of Faith is just as viable and important as the other. Sunday worship is no more sacrosanct than Bible Study or a community book group. Because we believe that church is found when we “bump up against Jesus” through interactions with people of faith, we recognize that those interactions may take the form of one-on-one discussions, going to a movie together, or large-group worship experiences.

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*The third precept is that all Acts of Faith are equal; no one Act (not even Sunday worship) carried more weight or significance in the life of the church.*

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For some, this is perhaps the most challenging part of this model of ministry because most of us were brought up in a traditional church of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century where “church” was synonymous with “Sunday worship.” It was commonplace to hear, “Let’s meet up after church,” or “I’ll see you before church starts.”

When “church” ceases to be just Sunday morning and truly becomes a 24/7 transforming agent in one’s life, then limiting it to worship on a given day and time seems very immaterial. As one of South’s Elders put it, “I can’t imagine Jesus saying, ‘I have the Living Word that will change your life, but you can only get it in our sanctuary at 11 a.m. on Sunday morning.’”<sup>iv</sup>

As soon as we accept the premise that “church” is the interconnected reality of all ministries, i.e. all *Acts of Faith*, then each *Act of Faith* becomes the embodiment and representation of the whole congregational experience. We apply the standard of our baptismal covenant (“Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27) to the living essence of the church community.)

When one is open to it, the Holy Spirit directs each person to the involvement that s/he needs with the community of faith. It is the Holy Spirit who can determine what each of us needs at every moment of her/his life and where each of us best fits into the expression of the Living Christ. We believe it would be an affront to the Holy Spirit to presume to tell someone that participation in group worship on a Sunday morning is the determining factor when it comes to their membership in the Church of Jesus Christ. Hence, there are members of South who rarely come to Sunday worship but who participate regularly in several *Acts of Faith* on weekdays. By our definition, each participant in our *Acts of Faith* is a vibrant member of our church whether or not they ever formalize her/his membership.

Despite more complicated and complex models for evaluating the efficacy of church programs, ours is quite simple:

*“When the Spirit is at work, energy and excitement are present.”<sup>v</sup>*

Because we believe that when God intends for something to be successful, it will be. We also believe that if something “isn’t working,” it is not meant to be done at that particular time and place.

Consequently, in evaluating our *Acts of Faith*, we give little concern to the number of participants or any other concrete measurement of success. We rely entirely on the manifestation of the Spirit that is shown through energy and excitement generated by those in a particular Act of Faith and in the neighborhood it serves. If there is no energy, then the Session drops the idea quickly and moves on to the next endeavor while explaining the reason and process to participants with pastoral sensitivity. We have learned that the activity might be a perfectly good Act of Faith but that if it has low levels energy and excitement, this initiative is the wrong time or place for it to become part of our active ministry.

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*The fourth precept is that the Session (i.e. the Church Council) is willing to try almost anything as a pilot program for three months. At that time it will become clear if it is energy-producing or energy-depleting. Energy-producing Acts are continued; energy-depleting Acts are quickly dismantled.*

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This model is simple to implement, and easy to evaluate. Because of the lack of bureaucracy in starting and ending our programmatic offerings, there is a constant flow of creativity, new ideas, attention and interest. This evergreen, ever-renewing model of ministry allows us to have rapid response time when needs arise without the hindrance of committee meetings and a long approval processes.

### ***Moving Forward:***

There are many models of ministry that are successful in meeting the needs of the people of God. Just as the Reformed Tradition teaches us that the Spirit interprets scripture for the individual who reads, hears, or otherwise experiences it, so, too, that same Spirit works through the ministries of a church in order to build up the Body of Christ.

South Presbyterian Church's *Acts of Faith* Model of Ministry is one approach that works for us in our urban setting, but we can see it readily adaptable to other locations and different demographic groups. It provides for the extreme flexibility that is needed for quick responses to people's needs and interests in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By focusing on energy and excitement as indicators of health, one is really focusing on the vitality of the congregation and *Acts of Faith* participants.

One of the major challenges that we have encountered lies in learning to think "outside the box" in non-traditional ways. It is the feeling at South Church that by building on our strengths and looking at those programs which reflect the Spirit through energy and excitement, we are better able to start with a clean page and redesign ministry based on those strengths and the practices through which the Spirit is already reaching our people. It is a grassroots, organic approach to system design which, we believe, is in keeping with our Reformed Tradition's roots. To assist you with your own process, we have included some of the types of questions we generally ask of ourselves. It would be wonderful for us to receive your additional questions and insights as you begin to explore your own ministries in this way.

We invite you to consider this model of ministry, and if prayerful discernment leads you to implement it, to make it your own through whatever adjustments seem prudent and Spirit-led. We also hope that you will share your successes, as well as your challenges and expansion of this outline, with us by contacting us at the below phone or email.

Our world is filled with broken and hurting people, just as it was in Jesus' day.

It is up to those of us who follow Him to work together in meeting the needs of the marginalized and the distressed, and one way to do that is by meeting them face-to-face through one Act of Faith at a time. Blessings on your ministry.

We're all in this together.  
To God be the Glory ...

In peace and faith,  
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Some questions which might be helpful in looking at your church "system" through new eyes:

1. What are the activities of your people which bring energy, excitement, and joy to you?
2. Are there activities outside of the church which some of you are especially drawn to (ex. Movies, book groups, dining out)?
3. Think about worship. What do you need to have present in order to feel like you are worshipping God?
4. What is the most populated place in your neighborhood? Barbershop? Gym? Café? Starbucks? Bar? What might it look like if three or four of you just went there to talk about life and ask each other, "Where's God in that experience for you?" (If you put a sign on the table that says, "We're

just kicking around ideas. Wanna join us?” and had a couple of extra chairs at the table, how many weeks do you think it would take before somebody joined you?)

5. Pretend that you are just starting a brand new church, getting together with friends in your community. What would it look like?

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<sup>i</sup> Mt 28:18-20

<sup>ii</sup> Scheier, Ivan. “Working with Grassroot Groups,” *Managing Diversity*, 1992. Downloaded 09/01/2015: <http://academic.regis.edu/volunteer/ivan/sect10/sect10h.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Gal.3:27.

<sup>iv</sup> Elder Barbara Sattora Sixbey, 2014.

<sup>v</sup> It should be noted, however, that “energy” does not mean “freneticism.” When we speak of “energy” we are referring to the almost-palpable presence of the Divine that accompanies meaningful encounters with the Holy. This may take the form of quiet, contemplative prayer as easily as it does loud praise music.