



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

The church has 'sold' the building

Evangelism & Discipleship

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South Presbyterian's 'Acts of Faith' model of ministry takes 'church' to Rochester

by Tammy Warren | Presbyterian News Service

ROCHESTER, NY — After 170 years on Mt. Hope Avenue, South Presbyterian Church voted to sell its historic building on Easter Sunday 2014, a day chosen by the congregation for its symbolism of resurrection.

"To commemorate the sale of the property, we held a combined service in August 2014," said South Church pastor the Rev. Deborah Fae Swift. "We presented the new owners, a Free Methodist congregation, with the trowel used to lay the building's cornerstone in 1894, and used again for an expansion of the church in the 1920s.



The idea for a bold, new re-visioning of church began to catch fire in Rochester with the sale of the South Presbyterian Church building on Mt. Hope Avenue in 2014. The church had literally "left the building." Photo by Deb Swift.

"None of us regrets selling the building," she said. "In fact, fairly often people from other churches will approach one of us with an 'I'm sorry for you' tone of voice, which catches all of us off guard." She added that South Church's evangelism coordinator recently replied to one person's well-meaning sympathy by saying, "Don't be sorry. We're not. It's the best thing that's ever happened to us. We have energy and are unencumbered now. We can just be about God's work

without spending time, energy and money on a building."

Last year, the 40 or so members of South Church touched nearly 500 lives in Rochester through 16 active, member-led **Acts of Faith** (<http://southchurch.myworshiptimes22.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2015/09/Acts-of-Faith-Model-of-Ministry.pdf>) (AoF) community groups.

This kind of “church” is about a rekindling or revitalization of the Spirit’s fire, rather than returning to spiritual life as most remember church to be when they were children. It’s a model that measures success by the *energy* and *excitement* of the Holy Spirit’s presence, more than by Sunday attendance, endowments or budgets. And, it’s an idea that has its origins in the first century church as recorded in the Book of Acts, where believers were called to live in the world and to share their faith in everything they did day to day.

South Church piloted the AoF model with three member-led community groups in 2010–11. These initial groups brought people together for Bible study at a bagel shop, Christian teaching at a senior living community and a book discussion at a diner. It currently has **16 AoF groups** (<https://southpc.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/05/AoF-Quadfold-2017.pdf>), in three areas of focus: worshiping communities, study and sharing, and social with a focus. Some groups are noticeably religious (Prayer on the Lawn), while others focus on community building and have no mention of God, Jesus or church (Mt. Hope World Singers). Almost all are member-led and all are equally significant in the life of the church.

“The essence of the Acts of Faith model is simple: ‘go where we are needed’ and ‘share the loving presence of the Risen Christ,’” Swift said. “Our world is filled with broken and hurting people, just as it was in Jesus’ day.”

Participating in an AoF group does not mean people have “joined the church,” Swift said. “You don’t even have to be Christian to participate. We welcome all sojourners.”

Each AoF is a circle of people sharing an interest or activity with approval of the Session (Church Council) for a three-month pilot period; followed by quarterly reviews to measure Holy Spirit indicators of energy and

excitement. As long as energy and excitement are present, the AoF is continued, if there is no energy and excitement the group is discontinued immediately and its members are notified — though if there is no energy and excitement, membership typically has already dissipated or dispersed.

Pastor Deb, as most call her, came to ministry as a second career, entering seminary at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School at age 33 after successful careers as a musician and public school teacher. Following her ordination as a minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church in 1990 she also served as a nonprofit administrator and



Mt. Hope World Singers, an AoF social with a focus group, performs songs of peace in indigenous languages from around the world at schools and public concerts March through May and September through November. Photo by Jim Ford.

community organizer in Rochester. Looking back she can see how God was preparing her for her current role as a ministry leader of multiple member-led AoF community groups. She came to South Church as pastor in May 2008.

From time to time South Church is invited to create an AoF group to meet a community need, as was the case with St. John's Meadows and Brickstone, a senior living community located one mile from the original church building.

St. John's had been searching for two years to find a church to provide weekly worship onsite for residents and the greater Rochester community. South Church was able to meet this need for casual but traditional Sunday worship through its **Fellowship of Faith** AoF group, which received a **seed grant** (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/1001-2/mission-program-grants/>) last month as an official 1001 New Worshipping Community of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The AoF model is gaining momentum in Rochester.

Choosing to partner with South Church in several AoF groups, New Life Presbyterian Church entered into a covenantal agreement with South Church in April 2015 to further explore the AoF model of ministry. New Life had nearly closed three or four times over the past two decades and only had 18 people in worship most Sundays.



Food for Thought, an AoF study and sharing group, prepares and serves dinner at an emergency homeless shelter in Rochester several times a year, and also gathers each Friday at Mt Hope Family Diner to share life and conversation around a variety of topics, religious and not. Photo by Carol Santos.

As a result of the partnership with South Church in AoF exploration, the congregation of New Life voted unanimously to sell its 190-year-old building and create a worshipping community in a blue-collar assisted-living facility one block from its current location and about 100 yards from the location where the congregation began in the 1820s.

New Life will hold its last Sunday worship service in the church building July 9 and

its first service in the assisted-living facility July 16. In addition to worship, the older adults are excited to host a weekly potluck and youth group activities. New Life and South believe that at some point in the near future, New Life will dissolve as a congregation and transfer its memberships to South Church, bringing with them their four active AoF groups. They will then do church as New Life on Monroe, the avenue where they are located and have their roots. It is hoped that New Life on Monroe will grow to become a 1001 New Worshipping Community of the PC(USA).

“Acts of Faith community groups are about worship and non-worship,” Swift said. “AoFs are organic grassroots ministries growing out of the needs of the people. The AoF model demonstrates that as we live out our faith, people will ‘bump up against Jesus’ through us.”

Since the greatest portion of mainline Christian churches in the U.S. today have fewer than 100 members, South Church anticipates the AoF model will be replicated in churches nationwide as the Holy Spirit leads, Swift said. In fact, South Church has established a new AoF group, Firebird Spirit, to coordinate, archive and share information about the AoF model with other congregations that express interest in learning more. They expect that **FirebirdSpirit.org** will be up and running by the end of the summer.

One of the South Church elders reminds people that Jesus didn’t wait on people to come to him, “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 on Sunday morning.’”

South Presbyterian Church: Transform Your Spirit. Transform Our World.

For more information on the Acts of Faith model of ministry, visit the website of South Presbyterian Church

(<https://southpc.org>) or contact the Rev. Deborah Fae Swift at 585-271-5078.



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