

‘Put us where you want us, and show us what to do’

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Through its Acts of Faith, South Presbyterian Church embraces Matthew 25 invitation

by Mike Ferguson / Presbyterian News Service



After selling its building five years ago, members and affiliate members of South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, meet in a variety of worship settings, including the assisted living center shown here and a psychiatric center. (Photo courtesy of South Presbyterian Church)

LOUISVILLE — A congregation without a building but with a proven record of innovation for serving the Rochester, New York, community — especially those living in the city’s margins — has accepted the Matthew 25 invitation. “I am so excited to have this national focus on a passage that has been a guiding light for our ministry for a long time,” said the Rev. Laura Bachmann, associate pastor at [South Presbyterian Church](#).

The [Matthew 25 invitation](#) calls Presbyterians to actively engage in the world through three focus areas: [building congregational vitality](#), [dismantling structural racism](#) and [eradicating systemic poverty](#). To date about 245 congregations and 25 mid councils have accepted the invitation, first extended April 1.

Bachmann began her work at South Presbyterian Church Jan. 1, working alongside the church’s longtime pastor, the Rev. Deborah Fae Swift.

Having sold its building five years ago, the church’s 53 members, together with a number of affiliate members, serve the Rochester community through its [Acts of Faith](#) model of ministry. The church defines the model as “an organic grassroots ministry growing out of the needs of people.” A group — which can be as few as two people — asks the session for permission to start up a ministry. The session has just one question before granting its approval: does it create energy and excitement?

“We understand that to mean the Spirit is present,” Bachmann said.

The model is drawn from this prayer: Put us where you want us, and show us what to do.

“It’s brand new but it’s old, like the early church,” Bachmann said of the ministry model. Ministry areas are varied, with some more overtly religious than others. The Dinner and a Movie group meets weekly to dine, view a movie and discuss the previous week’s film. The group typically occupies the “P” row at Rochester’s Cinema Theater. “‘P’ for ‘Presbyterian,’” Bachmann pointed out.

Monroe Milers is a youth running program in which youth train near the Mt. Hope Cemetery. They sometimes combine training and learning by visiting the gravesites of notable Americans including Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony.

New Life on Monroe is a weekly worshipping community that's housed in an assisted living facility serving a diverse population.



The Rev. Laura Bachmann is associate pastor at South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York. The church's session recently voted to accept the Matthew 25 invitation.

Serving at South Presbyterian Church “allows me to live out my faith in a meaningful way, true to what my call is,” Bachmann said. “I’d worked alongside Catholic Workers for two years and I wanted to continue that work (after coming to South). They said, ‘Great! How can we do that with you?’”

Through its Sonray Fellowship, South Presbyterian holds twice-monthly “casual, conversational worship” at the Rochester Psychiatric Center’s Regional Forensic Unit for court-placed patients and neighborhood residents.

“We were the first people in the state allowed into those forensic units to do that work,” Bachmann said. “It’s in our DNA to go find people where they are. It’s about allowing people to find their calling, then going out into the world to support that work.”

Bachmann calls worship in the psychiatric center “rich work.”

“They are there because something really awful has happened,” she said. “They have deep questions about forgiveness and restorative justice, and deep faith questions.”

The varied worship settings matter not a bit to South Presbyterian members and affiliate members, she said.

“We want to say you are always at church,” she said. “When I am at St. Joe’s (the Catholic Worker facility), I am a better pastor, preacher and person of faith for sitting in that building.”

A woman who’s been homeless for two decades attended Bachmann’s ordination service in July.

“I’ve learned from her the resilience of the human spirit and what faith can look like in a pinch,” Bachmann said.

South Presbyterian members and affiliates take over at St. Joe’s one Sunday each month so that the staff there gets a bit of a respite from its difficult work.

“We are able to be present there and embody our faith in a way I couldn’t do so deeply until I came here,” Bachmann said. “Some people are afraid to go in there, but I come away from there with deep joy. Maybe it’s because the Spirit is so present. That’s what I want other people to encounter.”

“So much of (Christian) mission is the empire model: Let me come in and fix you, rather than coming in humbly alongside and thanking people for welcoming me,” she said. “Can I sit here with you for a while? I hope (the Matthew 25 invitation) will inform those of us who want to address justice with the way we write laws, design transportation systems and decide who lives where.”

“Are we thinking about everyone?”



Without a building, worshippers at South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, have learned to worship in a number of settings. (Photo courtesy of South Presbyterian Church)