

Acts of Faith History | SPC Timeline 2010-2016

In 2010, South Presbyterian Church (<http://SouthPC.org/>), a traditional congregation with 165-year history of innovative thinking, education and the arts, located near the University of Rochester (NY), began to look at its future through new eyes. Recognizing the changing demographics of our neighborhood as well as the dwindling financial resources of our membership, we launched a five year, all-congregation discernment period that focused first on our identity, second on our call, and third on our mission in answering God's call. Each year in the five-year discernment had its own focus.

2010: We explored *What it Means to be Presbyterian*. Through Bible Study, classes on church history, instruction in Reformed Theology, through the use of denominational literature and guest speakers we looked at Who We Are, Who We Have Been, What Values We Held by our forefathers/mothers, and What We Believe Today. The result was a resounding commitment to maintain our affiliation with the PC(USA). In fact, it was not uncommon to hear comments such as, "I never knew we stood for that as a group. I thought it was just me," and "I'm so glad to know this is the official position because if I weren't Presbyterian, this is where I would WANT to be."

2011: After deciding to remain Presbyterian, our Pastor led us through a year-long study of *The Story*, a 31-week distillation of scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Everyone read, discussed and studied God's overarching Plan for humanity and how our individual stories are part of that Plan. Because we, as a group, hold very divergent theologies, the small group discussions were crucial in helping us have common language and shared experience in expressing our beliefs as well as learning to "agree to disagree" about personal interpretation of the Holy Word. It was in many ways Reformed Theology at its best because we all kept coming back to the touchstone that "God alone is Lord of the conscience" as we wrestled with our own faith and supported each other in their wrestling even though the outcomes and presuppositions were often very different.

2012: After discerning that we were Presbyterian and grounding ourselves once again in Holy Scripture, we began to look outside of our church building and for the next year we: (a) entertained speakers who taught us about reconfiguring church space in order to better meet the needs of the neighborhood, (b) dove into the changing demographics of our part of the city that houses the University, (c) continued our active participation in community development and neighborhood preservation meetings, and (d) connected with our sister urban Presbyterian Churches around common needs and interests as part of UPT (Urban Presbyterians Together <http://urbanpresbyterians.org/> – a consortium of PC(USA) churches located in Rochester, NY).

2013: In perfect timing (i.e. God's timing) all of the UPT churches engaged the New Beginnings program of the denomination. We found ourselves looking at possibilities for our future that four years before would have been unheard of, but because of our mutual and ongoing discernment through small groups and personal spiritual practices (which were also taught over those years) it seemed a perfectly natural "next step" at that point. The result from New Beginnings was clear: if we did nothing and continued as we were, we would be out of money and close our doors in November of 2014. As a result of New Beginnings, the congregation voted to hire a Commercial Realtor who drafted a 50-page Request for Proposal and circulated it to more than 80 developers and potential buyers in our part of the country. (The Realtor mentioned to the Pastor that he had never been a part of meetings that began and ended with prayer before ... nor had he ever experienced a group where everyone was engaged in seeking

God's counsel ... but, he shared, this experience caused him to develop his own prayer process and renew his relationship with Jesus!) Proposals began coming to us in early 2014.

2014: Through our discernment, South Church has recognized a few things: (1) Our Acts of Faith Model of Ministry (**please see attached**) that we were developing is working for us; (2) The Acts of Faith Model *must* include worship, and in our case that means worship in various styles with different groups in different locations; and (3) "Church" is not about the building. We first had to look at ditching the building because of money but in the process we learned that we were really *called* to become a missional church!

A suitable buyer was found (a newly developing Free Methodist congregation) and our discernment led us to believe that we were meant to sell our property to them, maintaining an office presence in our old church building for five years.

On Easter Sunday, South Church's "resurrection" as a missional congregation was embraced when, at a meeting of the congregation following our Easter Service, our longest-serving member (76 years he had been worshipping with us) made a motion that was seconded by our newest member (6 months a member, though she was in her 80's as well) that we sell the church. Motion carried with only one exception (a woman who said she would never vote to sell her church) and the process continued through Presbytery channels until the closing of the sale in June, 2014.

At each point along the way the Session entered into 24-48 hours of personal reflection, discernment and prayer to prepare themselves to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit. On the night that the Session voted to recommend the sale to the congregation, our sister UPT Churches held a prayer vigil for the community as well as church members both before and during the Session meeting. It was quite an event.

As our various Acts of Faith took off, including a community book study at a neighborhood diner, and a ministry with the Rochester Psychiatric Center, no plans had yet been made about Sunday worship.

Three days before the property closing, a Senior Living Community, St. John's Meadows, one mile from the church approached our Pastor about having Sunday worship at their facility. They had no weekly services of any sort and had been looking for a way to offer that *for two years*. Again, after prayerful consideration and discernment, the Session voted yes and took the decision to the congregation.

This invitation from the Meadows met all of our criteria for an Act of Faith: two or more people expressed a need, we had the expertise to go and address their need where they were, and so our session approved beginning a worship service in a common room of the senior community.

Several, though not all, South members began revisioning Sunday worship as a mission to this new community. It was our newest Act of Faith, and was located one mile from where we had first had Bible study in 1847.

And this is when things really began to change: The evolution of ***Fellowship of Faith***.

By the time we held an Annual Meeting in February, 2015, we had four different ministries (Acts of Faith) at the Meadows: Sunday worship, Saturday Bible Study, a senior spirituality group, and a weekly choir rehearsal. The Annual Meeting saw sixty-three people in attendance, only 24 of whom had been

part of the original, i.e. “old South” church. The others were all newly affiliated with us through our four Acts of Faith, including the Sunday Worship service. On Christmas Eve, four residents of the Meadows officially joined as members. An additional 30 Meadows residents were active in at least one of our four weekly ministries.

This is NOT just “South relocated.” South Presbyterian’s ministries have taken it to the Rochester Psychiatric Center, to the northern-most part of the city on Lake Ontario, fourteen miles from the Meadows, to ministries in diners and in the Center City. Fellowship of Faith, however, has become a strong and active New Worshipping Community.

2015 & 2016: Throughout that year, the Sunday worshipping group continued to grow, and in the spring of 2016 the group worshipping on Sunday Morning at the Meadows was ready to claim their new identity as a cohesive unit. Folks who had been hitherto unknown to each other (Meadows Residents, former South members, and new people from the community) were forming bonds of friendship outside of worship. They were praying for each other. A faith community was really beginning to take shape, and so on Pentecost (May 15, 2016), following a time of prayerful consideration, soliciting potential names for our Act of Faith, and a vote by the Session of South Presbyterian Church, **Fellowship of Faith** met for worship for the first time under its new and permanent name. Four people (all residents of the Meadows) were received into membership. The “birthday of the church” had become the official birthday of our new worshipping community.

We are all continuing to discern (through prayer, small discussion groups, preaching, meditating, Bible Study, mini-retreats and more) what it is that God is calling our “wee kirk” to do and to be. Our discernment has led us to the point of this application, requesting your prayerful concurrence with this new reality and designation.

