

South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, celebrates the decision to sell its building to focus on faithful acts

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The 40-member faith community will salute its varied ministries in a big way this weekend

by Mike Ferguson | Presbyterian News Service



Nearly a decade ago, South Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, sold its building to focus on investing in a wide array of ministries. The congregation, which worships each Sunday in a Rochester senior center, will hold a gala celebration this weekend. (Contributed photo)

LOUISVILLE — This weekend, [South Presbyterian Church](#) in Rochester, New York, will celebrate the beginning of the second decade of selling its building and implementing its [Acts of Faith](#) community, a throwback to a first-century model of being the church.

After selling its building in 2014, the congregation — which now numbers about 40 — embraced a prayer it has prayed many times since: “Put us where you want us, God, and show us what to do.”

2024 will mark 175 years since the founding of the church, and South Presbyterian [plans public celebrations](#) beginning Saturday. The Rev. Dr. Ray Jones III, director of [Theology, Formation and Evangelism](#), will join the celebration and help lead worship at a senior center where South Presbyterian worships.

“I continue to be thankful for God’s serendipitous grace in connecting me with the leaders of South Presbyterian Church,” Jones said. “I have learned so much from their courage and willingness to change. They boldly engaged the new thing God was doing in their midst by selling their church building and creating Acts of Faith across Rochester. They made the gospel decision to leave their building and go where the people live their lives in the community.”

The Rev. Dr. Ray Jones III



“As their ministry continues to change hearts and lives,” Jones said, “this expression of the body of Christ exemplifies God’s faithfulness and love for all people.”

The Rev. Deb Swift, South Presbyterian Church’s pastor, said that 15 years ago, the congregation determined that if it held onto its building and made needed repairs, the church would run out of money in seven years. “I thought it was hyperbole, but it wasn’t,” said Swift. “We started doing these [Acts of Faith] ministries even before we sold the building.”

Eventually a [1001 New Worshiping Community](#) was formed. Currently the church sponsors 14 Acts of Faith groups, which include:

- [Cuppa the Bible](#), a weekly Bible study with this tagline: “You supply the ‘cuppa’ — the Spirit supplies the message.”
- [Living Bread Ministry](#), where members bake bread regularly and offer a variety of loaves wrapped in new dish towels to anyone who may need encouragement or special prayers.

- [Matthew 25 Discussion Groups](#), focused study groups dealing with the issues of racism, poverty, hunger and homelessness.
- [Senior Spirituality](#), small support groups that first study the aging process with Swift and then accompany each other along the way.
- [Soul Sustainability](#), a social group of 20-somethings working to sustain the environment, their spirits and themselves by creating a safe place to define their faith community.

Swift explains the Acts of Faith ministry model in a video that can be viewed [here](#).

The Rev. Deb Swift

“It’s about redefining church,” Swift said. “In our case, we embraced the first-century model when there was no centralized church location. We go wherever someone has an interest or a need, and we do organic, grassroots community organizing around that spiritual theme.” Each of those programs is an Act of Faith, she said.



“God finds a way to speak to us in a language we can understand,” Swift said. “We know that from the first Pentecost in [Acts 2](#), and who are we to say what someone else might experience as worship?”

During the pandemic, several Acts of Faith groups morphed into online groups, which has allowed them to build community beyond the Rochester area. The current array of 14 Acts of Faith groups includes participants from North Carolina, Florida, Utah, Washington state, New Jersey and Ithaca, New York. Ten ministries remain in-person in Rochester. Soul Sustainability, a group of five Millennials, is the most recent Acts of Faith group to form.

Soul Sustainability is one of 14 members of the Acts of Faith community.



“I had them to dinner and I said, ‘If we are going to have a future, it’s going to be you,’” Swift said. “They were super excited.” One who’d trained as a graphic artist created Soul Sustainability’s logo — a skull with a flower growing through its eyeball. “I let the older folks know,” Swift said, pausing a beat. “They thought it was great.”

When one Soul Sustainability granting source didn’t come through, other Acts of Faith groups donated \$1,200 to pay for a few months of Soul Sustainability activities,

including a trip to the local planetarium. One member told Swift, “That’s where I feel the presence of God. That’s where I see where I am in the universe.”

Each of the 14 Acts of Faith will make a brief presentation during the weekend celebration.

“This is a model anyone can do,” Swift said, and she wrote a case study how-to workbook, “The Church has Left the Building,” to show how it’s done. A separate nonprofit, Firebird Spirit, exists to work with other faith communities, including presbyteries, considering such a move.

A 1 p.m. panel on Saturday will explore the theme “What’s Next and How do We Get There?” Susan Orr, transitional leader and stated clerk of the [Presbytery of Genesee Valley](#), will emcee the event, and Jones and others will speak. After that, Acts of Faith groups will celebrate the many community partnerships that have formed over the last 10 years. [Third Presbyterian Church](#) in Rochester will host the celebration.

“This weekend, we just want to have fun,” Swift said. “Too rarely do we stop to embrace what God has done in our midst. God has done amazing things through this merry band of believers. They just keep saying yes to God.”