## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE TO ALL MEDIA

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## Life After the Church Building

Sell the building – Go where the people are – It's what this Church did, and they grew!

[Rochester, NY] South Presbyterian Church today announced the kick-off to the second decade of its Acts of Faith Community following the sale of its church building in 2014. This milestone is a major move for all aging congregations looking for a way to grow their ministry with declining enrollment.

"It's about re-defining church," says the Rev. Deborah Fae Swift, Pastor of South Presbyterian and the Acts of Faith Community. "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, grass-roots, community organizing around that spiritual theme. Each of these programs is called an Act of Faith," she added.

Some Acts of Faith (AoF's) are traditionally church-oriented like worship or Bible Study while others seem, at first, to have no relationship to what most of us grew up thinking "church" to be such as Dinner and a Movie, or a walking meditation group. "God finds a way to speak to us in a language we can understand," Swift added. "We know that from the first Pentecost in Acts 2, and who are we to say what someone else might experience as worship?"

This news comes in the wake of many church closings in our area, yet South Presbyterian has documented more than 35,000 contacts through their Acts of Faith since leaving their permanent structure in 2014, a number that stands in stark contrast to their church membership which hovers just below 40.

"We are not trying to recruit members," says Elder Sonya Kennedy, Clerk of Session for the church. "We know that every time we are with someone, they will 'bump up against Jesus' through us." "Right," continued Elder Barb Sixbey. "It's not our job to convert people. That's the Spirit's job. Ours is just to be present. To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly like it says in Micah."

Before COVID, the church had twenty Acts of Faith in the Rochester area, including five different worshiping communities ranging from a high-rise in Charlotte, to the Regional Forensic Unit of the Rochester Psychiatric Center. They go where the people are and take the Spirit's message with them. Their Acts of Faith have included two groups which outgrew them – a community choir and a youth running group.

During COVID, several of their Acts of Faith morphed into online groups which still allow them to build community beyond this region. Their current fourteen AoF's include regular participants in North Carolina, Florida, Utah, Washington State, New Jersey, Ithaca, NY and of course, Monroe and

surrounding counties. Ten of their ministries remain in-person across the city of Rochester. The most recent, Soul Sustainability, was started this summer by millennials who are focused on sustainability of the planet, of themselves as young professionals of color, and of their spirit in this demanding and divisive world.

On Saturday, September 23, 2023, South Presbyterian will begin a year-long celebration of its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary in conjunction with beginning the second decade since selling their building and developing the Acts of Faith Community.

A 1PM panel exploring, "What's Next and How do We Get There?" will be emceed by Susan Orr, Leader of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley and will feature the Rev. Dr. Ray G. Jones who is the Director of Theological Formation and Evangelism for the Presbyterian Church (USA) headquartered in Louisville, KY.

Following the discussion a reception will highlight the fourteen current Acts of Faith and celebrate the many community partnerships this church has created in the last ten years. Both events will be hosted by Third Presbyterian Church at the corner of Meigs Street and East Avenue. Although speaking from a Presbyterian standpoint, the information will be universally applicable to all churches and all are invited to attend. Admission is free, but in order to ensure enough chairs and food, you are asked to phone the church office (585-271-5078), leave your name and the number of people in your party.

"Look," Pastor Deb continued, "we all grew up with churches that tried to attract people. South does not want to be attractional. That doesn't work for many small churches today. You know, Jesus went where the people were, and our church's mission is to 'Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in Jesus' way of life'. Our whole focus is to let people know that they are loved by the One who created them. No fear. No judgment. Just love. And that the Spirit is with them. They are never alone. That kind of message," she added, "changes lives."

You can learn more about South Presbyterian Church and the Acts of Faith Community by visiting their website at https://southpc.org/. Click on the Welcome tab for videos and interviews.

