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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 worshipping 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

