

Brought To This Place

*A Portrait of North Presbyterian Church
on the Anniversary of its 150th Year*

By

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Pastor, 1987 - Present

Preface

North Presbyterian Church is celebrating its 150th anniversary on October 15, 2005. That's not unusual in itself. Many churches have reached that *sesquicentennial* mark and others have already celebrated *bicentennials*. What may be unusual is that North Church is facing this birthday with as much hope and excitement for a new future as appreciation and gratitude for our glorious past. We're not just looking back; we're looking forward! Our conviction is that our history is a story of a Spirit-led journey of formation, growth, wandering and wondering, and transformation, and that the Lord has brought us to this place – this place in time, this place on our journey, this place in the city, this place of mission and purpose, this place of vision for the future.

I originally wrote this portrait of North Church as part of my Doctor of Ministry Project at Columbia Theological Seminary, which required me to produce a “thick description” of my “ministry context.” It was not until after I completed this paper, that it occurred to me to offer it as a gift to guests at the 150th Anniversary Dinner of the Church.

This is, admittedly, “my take,” but I've learned that personal impressions, even if you don't agree with them, still provide valuable insights. And please remember, I originally wrote this for an *academic setting*, not an anniversary dinner! The only changes I've made are to add this preface and three short sentences at the end of the paper, and a few minor edits.

If you're a member, or former member, or former minister, or other honored guest, my hope is this picture of North Church will deepen your appreciation, not just for this congregation with which you have some connection, but first and foremost, for the gracious, patient, and wise work of God's Spirit, guiding, sustaining, and transforming the people who have been called and sent to be the hopeful presence of Christ in the world.

Serving Christ with you,

Erwin Goedicke
October 6, 2005

I The Place Where North Presbyterian Church Finds Itself

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you”

(Jeremiah 29:7)

As you have driven through various old sections of cities around the country—not downtown, but definitely old, urban neighborhoods just a few minutes from downtown—you’ve driven past “North Presbyterian Church” many times. It’s that 120-year old red-brick, neo-gothic edifice with a steeple that still rises above all the other buildings in the neighborhood. Attached is the typical orange-brick Christian Education wing added in 1955 that now houses a child care center. The grounds have recently been landscaped and are neatly kept. There’s a new lighted church sign, and by the bus stop in front of the church, a small paved area carved out of church property with a bench inscribed with the words, “‘Come unto me and rest.’ Matthew 11:28.” The church building is just before the first of three main intersections in the neighborhood, across from a branch of the public library and between an African-American barbershop and a house that has become home to an ecumenical community ministry. The church looks big—which it is not, with 121 on the membership roll—and it looks “white”—which it still is, mostly.

A drive around the neighborhood would provide the usual sights you might associate with an “inner-city neighborhood.” Young men you suspect of being drug dealers are gathered at various corners and older men and women you suspect of being homeless addicts or alcoholics shuffle up and down the main streets, though many are in fact residents of several “group homes” in the neighborhood. Many children who look much too young to be unsupervised are walking or playing on the sidewalk. About half are African-American and half (white) urban Appalachian. Occasionally you’ll get a glimpse of a child with her mom or dad, who looks like she goes to school in some other neighborhood. You would also see a number of second-hand stores (records, appliances, “antiques,” computers, clothing), a tattoo parlor, three greasy-spoon eateries, a “sexual novelties” shop, several beauty parlors and a gay “leather bar” right next door to an Apostolic store-front church, which is across the street from a Metropolitan Community storefront church.

There is, of course, lots of litter. But there are also plentiful signs of community development and renewal. The sidewalks on the main avenue, which is part of a major north-south transportation corridor in the greater metropolitan area, are inlaid with new paving block and new “old-fashioned” street lamps. You’ll discover a couple new children’s parks, fresh paint on many of the homes, several new trendy eateries, bars and cafes, some new specialty shops (glass blowing, African imports, arty clothing), a greenhouse that has been converted to a community garden, and, directly across from the Gay and Lesbian Community Center, a masonic lodge that has become the “Maitri Center” offering yoga and meditation classes and alternative music performances. While in 1992 one demographic study (Church Information and Development Systems) described the largest lifestyle group as “surviving multi-ethnic urbanites,” an analysis by the same group 8 years later named the largest group as “ethnic and urban diversity” (54% Anglo, 44% African American). This growing segment of non-traditional households with higher incomes and educational levels includes a significant number of artists, writers, musicians, architects, university professors, and social workers. (Statistics about the

church and the community are taken from a number of resources listed in the Select Bibliography.)

CityBeat, an alternative news magazine that covers news, public issues, arts and entertainment of interest to readers in Greater Cincinnati, has dubbed the community of Northside a “scrappy and hip neighborhood” (2002) and probably “the most diverse and happening neighborhood in Cincinnati right now” (2000). Not everyone would agree with or celebrate that description, but this tight neighborhood of some 4000 households, nestled at the base of three of Cincinnati’s “seven hills,” definitely has the feel of community about it. The official web page of this community proclaims Northside an “Urban Village . . . the place to be for those who want an urban environment, yet also want to connect with their neighbors just as if they lived in a small town” (<http://www.northside.net>, June 1, 2005).

On a warm August Saturday morning the streets will be alive with a neighborhood-wide yard sale, sponsored by the Northside Community Council, hosted by Churches Active in Northside, and guarded by the Citizens on Patrol group. These kinds of community-wide events, along with cooperative efforts to address concerns of safety, education, appearance or growth are typical. Storefronts display posters to “Support Northside Businesses,” and people do. Bankers, police officers, the school crossing guard, the pastor of a local house church, the owner of multiple rental properties, the clerk at the hardware store, and the activities director at the local recreation center address each other by name as they pass on the street in the morning on the way to one of two coffee shops, where they can catch up on the latest buzz on the neighborhood. Northside is kind of an edgy and funky urban Mayberry.

In this gritty, eclectic, and largely progressive setting, North Presbyterian Church and the community of Northside are somewhat like new next door neighbors who want to be in good relationship but are not sure about one another. They are obviously very different in lifestyle and values and would not naturally be friends, but they work hard at being good neighbors; congenial and cooperative, but careful in their interactions with one another. The church is definitely “one of the original residents.” It’s the changing face of the neighborhood that makes them new neighbors.

On a typical Sunday, about 60 worshipers gather for the morning service. Slightly more than one quarter (27%) are of retirement age, although most of them have hardly slowed down. Bill and Betty M., both about to turn 80 are typical of this group. Betty has been the Benevolence Treasurer for 20 years or so, and both of them volunteer 2 times a week at the food pantry next door. A half dozen or more teens cluster in one corner of the sanctuary, with as many children, from pre-schoolers to pre-adolescents scattered throughout with their parents, making up another quarter of the congregation. There are a handful of young adults in their 20's. The remaining 20 or so worshipers are fairly evenly divided between “Baby Boomers” and “Gen-Xers,” making the average age of the congregation 49, slightly younger than the average age of 51 for all U.S. congregations and significantly younger than most mainline churches (58) and the PC(USA) (55).

About half of these folks have been members their whole lives or for decades. But 44% have only been participating in worship and activities of the church for less than 10 years and

over half of these newer members live in the neighborhood, or lived there when they joined. On most Sundays, there are three or four regular visitors in worship and often one or two first-time visitors. Ninety percent of the congregation is Anglo-American. The greatest cultural diversity is seen among the youth who attend, which include a Hispanic brother and sister and about four to six African-American or bi-racial children and youth. When the youth group meets on Sunday evenings or for special events, the diversity is even more evident.

The congregation is more blue-collar middle-class than most Presbyterian churches, with jobs as truck drivers, a custodian, a printer, a plumber, a tool and die maker. Others serve as store managers and in various clerical roles. 25% have some education or training beyond high school and another 30% have earned college or graduate degrees and are working as nurses, teachers, and engineers. There is one retired physician and a Dean of the Art Academy. Less than half (43%) of the congregation is employed outside the home and there are several who receive some form of public assistance. Socio-economically, the congregation is fairly reflective of the surrounding community. And although only one third currently live in Northside, nearly all of the congregation has some tie to the neighborhood (family connections, former residents) and more than three quarters of them drive 15 minutes or less to attend church.

Perhaps the greatest differences between the worshipping congregation and the flavor of the neighborhood, in addition to racial-ethnic diversity, are in approaches to faith and social issues. Although there is certainly not a unanimity of opinion, no one in the church is adamantly “liberal,” either theologically or politically. There are several who accept the label “fundamentalist.” At least a third identify as evangelicals, charismatic or pentacostal, and about a quarter see themselves as traditionalists or moderates. When the Session (ruling elders) of the church adopted a “Confessing Resolution” in 2001, thereby aligning itself with the most conservative bloc within the PC(USA), there were a handful of members and two staff who expressed serious concern (which led to a congregational forum on the issue), but no one left the church and that action didn’t create any permanent divisions or hard feelings. Most members expressed support or relief over that stance. A pro-life crisis pregnancy center, an ex-gay ministry, and an American Heritage girls group are included in the church’s mission budget. Within the Presbytery of Cincinnati, North Church is known to be a conservative congregation, though not isolationist like some or activist like others.

By contrast, the community of Northside is decidedly among the most liberal or progressive in the city of Cincinnati. During the most recent election, there wasn’t a Bush-Cheney placard to be found in the neighborhood. Northside proudly “celebrates diversity” and boasts the largest gay-pride event in the tri-state region. A feminist bookstore is home to a “Women Writing for Change” project. Alternative lifestyles, alternative spiritualities, and alternative clothing reflect the community’s growing non-traditional character. With the exception of the Roman Catholic church, North Presbyterian represents the most visible conservative presence in the neighborhood.

These differences between the church and community do not prevent a lively and positive relationship between the two. North Church has defined its mission as “living out the love of Christ in our relationships with one another and with the world, beginning with Northside” and holds as part of its vision, becoming a congregation that is “in love with our

Community and the people who live in it.” As a starting point, that has meant offering its facilities to the community. Three twelve-step groups, the Northside Business Association, block watch groups, and a quarterly networking luncheon for local social service providers regularly meet at the church. North’s hospitality and availability has made it the site of choice for such community building events as an annual banquet to honor peacemakers in the neighborhood, job training and home financing fairs, interracial dialogues, a workshop to foster understanding among Northside’s diverse residents, community forums with representatives of the utility company and, once, even with U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno.

The church likewise seeks to be positively engaged in the community, promoting and participating in events like the annual 4th of July Parade, neighborhood clean-up days, and a biennial house tour. Several members have served and provided leadership for the Community Council, Citizens on Patrol, and the Business Association. Others make it a regular practice to talk with neighbors, patrons and proprietors of nearby shops, and commuters waiting for the bus out front. “North Church is a good neighbor,” declared two past presidents

of the Community Council. This ministry of gracious presence has been North Church’s primary witness in the community of Northside.

Characteristic of Presbyterian churches, North has also been a champion of ecumenical relations and endeavors in the community. Substantial financial support, weekly involvement by a dozen members and church staff, and special projects involving the whole congregation makes North one of the anchor churches of Churches Active In Northside, a food pantry and community ministry co-founded by North Church 10 years ago, and this past year named “Agency of the Year” by an Ohio association of food banks. In 1998, North also spearheaded a 14-church collaborative outreach project to distribute a free copy of the “JESUS Video” (the story of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke, produced by Campus Crusade for Christ) to some 2,500 households in Northside. Three years ago, North organized the evangelistic Alpha Course, shared with an Episcopal, American Baptist, and a Pentecostal church and held in a storefront ministry in the main business district. The church counts a local transitional ministry for female ex-offenders and an outreach program to Northside’s “street people” among its local mission partners. Over the last seven years, the church has also developed a dynamic youth ministry that impacts 30-40 teens a year, the majority of them from the neighborhood and initially unchurched. A number of these teens have become involved in the worship and mission of the church beyond the youth group, and some have become members.

Sunday morning is certainly the heart of the congregational life at North Church. Worship services vary from week to week, ranging from traditional (with organ, hymns, choir, and liturgy) to blended contemporary led by a newly formed praise ensemble. Children are included in worship in a variety of ways, most often through a “Message for Young Disciples.” A sign language interpreter signs the whole service for the congregation’s one deaf member. Sometimes as many as one third of those present are involved in leading or serving in worship. Communion is served twice a month, two different ways. Prayer requests are spoken out loud and healing prayer with anointing oil is offered on the third Sunday of the month during communion served by intinction. Video projections, mostly for announcements before the service and lyrics during worship, but occasionally with sermon notes or video clips, accompany

every service. The worship service typically lasts an hour and fifteen minutes, but frequently goes longer, and is followed by a fellowship time leading into “Discovery Hour” — classes for children and teens and up to four classes or studies for adults. Visitors are always greeted when they arrive and sought out by many of the members after worship and invited to stay for the fellowship and classes. About half of the worshipping congregation remains for these classes, which like the service, often run longer than scheduled. “The Best Two Hours of the Week,” as Sunday mornings have been named, typically last three or more hours. It is highly participative, somewhat informal and generally inter-generational.

Two-thirds to three-fourths of the congregation describe Sunday morning as an experience “of God’s presence,” “inspiring,” and somewhat or very “helpful for everyday living.” A few express boredom or frustration. Some, both younger and middle-aged members, would like an even more contemporary style of worship. Others, both older and younger, want more traditional hymns. But nearly all these with reservations would agree with Mary A., a life-long Presbyterian, now 90 years old, who said, “You know, I don’t like all these changes . . . but I know they are necessary.” She attends faithfully as she can, and often brings friends from the retirement community where she lives.

North Presbyterian Church, originally “The First Presbyterian Church of Cumminsville” (as Northside was then known), and once boasting over 1,200 members, is now officially a “small church” — small, but very vital and active, and content with being small, for now. The one hundred or so active members have a high level of commitment, with about 70% involved in the life of the church beyond Sunday mornings. They serve as deacons, small group leaders, mission team members, flower coordinator, newsletter editor, facility maintenance crew, AV technicians, kitchen coordinator, and other formal and informal roles that make up the weekly life of this church.

Close to two-thirds of this congregation have a sense excitement about the church’s future, while a quarter are neutral or unsure, and 11% are pessimistic. 70% are aware of the church’s clear vision, direction, and goals and are committed to them (26% “strongly,” 44% “partly”). That vision, as Harold, one of the newest elders on Session has expressed it for the transition team he is leading is “to become a missional congregation where everyone *und erstands* the biblical importance of, and is *per sona lly involv ed* in showing, telling, and inviting all people to the life God intends for us, and Jesus Christ has made possible through his Good News.” How Harold, and hopefully North Church, came to that understanding of its desired future, is where we now turn.

II The Story of North Presbyterian Church

“The Lord has brought us to this place.”

(Deuteronomy 26:9)

North Presbyterian Church has always had a great appreciation of its history, probably because it has always had a strong sense of its destiny. In 1905, at the 50th Anniversary of the church, elder Merwyn Turrill, the last remaining of fifteen charter member of the congregation, presented a rich and personal recollection of the church’s first half century.

My many friends and church members: Thankful that a kind Providence has spared my life thus far, thankful for the honor of a place on the program, I will speak of persons and events, that led to the formation of our Church.” (Mimeograph copy of address of Merwyn S. Turrill, 16 October 1905 in unpublished *Jubilee Book, Vol II.*:39. NPC archives.)

That address became the motivation for Merwyn Turrill to establish what has since come to be known as the Archives Room, a treasure trove of original documents — receipts for various purchases including the original property of the first church building, ledgers and leather bound minutes containing an annual “Narrative of the State of Religion,” sermons, photographs, newsletters and correspondence, and artifacts from members and ministers. These resources, along with later records and oral histories have made it possible to assemble a rather comprehensive story of the changes and developments through which North Church has traveled over the past 150 years.

During Lent of 2004, I led the congregation in a five week theological reflection on this journey of change. Beginning with the founding of the congregation in 1853 through to the present, each week focused on a period in the life of the church. The format included a meal such as might have been shared by the congregation at that time, a dramatic presentation by various church members called “Voices of the Past,” a brief historical sketch of that period, and small group discussion on how the Spirit of God may have been present in the events, decisions and developments of those years. Each week also featured some visual artifacts of that period in the church’s life, including a time line of events (national, community, and church) and a poster that symbolized and characterized that period of the church’s history in terms of the zones of change through which a system cycles, as outlined by Alan Roxburgh in *Christendom Thinking to Missional Imagination* (not yet published). A brief overview of these five stages will set the stage for describing the process of missional transformation over the past four years.

Roxburgh’s model for mapping organizational change defines three main zones through which organizations move. Beginning as a pioneering organization (“Green Zone,” for growth), congregations progress to establishment organizations (“Blue Zone,” the color of many stable corporations like IBM, etc.) and inevitably take on the characteristics of a regulatory agency (“Red Zone,” signaling crisis) as they encounter discontinuous change. For Roxburgh, transformation involves looping back from the Red Zone into the Blue Zone to provide a period of stability for future change and then re-emerging into the Green Zone for a period of new growth or even evolution to a new entity. This model provides a useful template for understanding NPC’s own history.

1853-1905: “Pioneering A Church”

It would be fair to represent the first 50 years of North Church (the church was actually chartered in 1855, although meetings and worship began as early as 1850) as a “Green” period of missional growth. The petition for organization is rooted in a sense of God’s call and a conviction that the church does not exist for its own sake.

...it is important for the spiritual welfare of us and our families, and necessary as a means for the conversion of sinners unto God in this community and for the good of the cause of religion generally, to have an (O.S.) Presbyterian church in this place. (Minutes of the Session of North Presbyterian Church 1855-1894:1)

At the end of its first decade, Rev. A. J. Reynolds, pastor of the church at the time, wrote in his annual report,

The church in Cumminsville is one which in the providence of God seems to have a great work set before it, a work which it must perform if it is to be blessed by the Master, and which if performed faithfully will build up the Presbyterian Church and the Kingdom of Christ most gloriously in the salvation of many souls. We . . . pray God. . . [to] give us grace to go in at the open door which he has evidently set before us. and which we trust, “no man can shut.” (NPC 1855-1894: 40)

Two decades later, on April 11, 1886, Rev. Joseph Anderson took as his sermon text for the first service held in the new church building (now the present home of the congregation) those same words from Revelation 3:8, “I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (KJV). It is significant that both messages were not, “Our doors are open to you” — as if the church were opening its doors for the community to come in — but that God was opening a door for the church to go out into the neighborhood. The focus of the church in those early years was definitely outward. Although the primary concern of the church’s leadership was “the development of a higher Christian life and activity; and a practical, living realization of the importance of spiritual and eternal things,” which required “the outpouring of the Spirit of God upon our entire community” (NPC 1855-1894:97), personal discipleship and the corporate life of the congregation were understood to be a witness and ministry to the community. Members were expected to maintain family worship and to walk “in an honest and consistent manner before the world” (NPC 1855-1894:71) and not in “a spirit of conformity to the world [and] a willingness to yield to its customs, its maxims and its pleasures” (NPC 1855-1894:79). “In its quiet Presbyterial way,” wrote a local historian in 1914, “[North Presbyterian Church] has exerted an untold influence for good upon the community” (Felter:21). The congregation which began with 15 charter members, had become a landmark in the community.

1905 - 1955: “Growth and Establishment”

During the second third of its history, from 1905 to 1955, North Church became one of the city of Cincinnati’s “tall steeple churches” and one of the anchor institutions of the community now known as Northside. Early in this “Blue Zone” period, Rev. Earl Lewis Lee wrote in his

“Pastoral Record Book” on May 1, 1905,

It certainly looks at the present writing as if the old North Church was destined for increasingly greater things on account of the growth of the ward. Building are going up everywhere . . . God grant that we may advance in things spiritual as well. (Unpublished *Pastoral Record Book, Volume III:3*, NPC archives)

But as early as 1909, that spiritual advance was being questioned. An article written in the community newspaper and in the Presbytery’s magazine, reported that

The Northside Presbyterian Church held six meetings during the Week of Prayer, with attendance reaching about one hundred at three of the services. . . While the interest at the meetings was good, enough so to lift them far above the ordinary, it was of that type that comes from a sense of loyalty to the meetings of the church. The thing had been laid on the members’ consciences, and they felt they ought to attend. There was no moving spirit of prayer in evidence. The minute the meeting was dismissed it was like a social gathering. All any one seemed to feel was that the meeting was not too long, and it had a good tone and sustained interest. (*Session Scrap Book* in NPC Archives)

Despite that lackluster spiritual response, North Church, like most mainline congregations, enjoyed almost effortless and explosive growth, peaking in 1955 with 1,250 members. But the focus of the congregation shifted to its social life and church leaders were primarily concerned about preserving and strengthening the organization and institution the church had become. In place of the “Annual Narrative Report on the State of Religion,” the official records of the church now made passing reference to “reports from committees” and contained instead lengthy resolutions on organization and building improvements.

In October 1955, the 100th anniversary of the church, Rev. Dr. John King Mitchell wrote in the pastor’s article in the church newsletter, *The North Chimes* (Vol V No 3:1)

We of North Church, are exceedingly sensitive to the importance of history in this month of October, 1955 . . . This congregation wrote an important page in history on Monday evening, September 12. Then it was that a large number of the congregation in pro re nata session, heard the report of the Building Committee and voted to authorize . . . construction of the new educational unit... It was a serious action. . . but will we ever have a better chance to shape the course of history or take a part in the building of the Kingdom of God?

Significantly, “building the Kingdom of God” had changed from “the salvation of many souls” to the “construction of a new educational unit.” However, it was these years of prosperity and building, however, which provided the church with the resources needed to survive the challenges of the coming years, including a sizeable endowment fund established by the president of the Northside Bank and Trust Company and the other prominent men of the church (private conversation with Art Chapman, church member since 1923, Monday, June 13, 2005). This too was part of God’s leading.

1955 - 1970: “Coming to Grips with Decline”

Alan Roxburgh describes the “Red Zone” as what happens to a Blue Zone organization and its leaders who suddenly encounter discontinuous change. The bottom dropped out of North Church’s growth chart shortly after the new educational wing was dedicated in 1957. The first wave of urban flight from the community began in the late fifties and early sixties after several major manufacturers and businesses in the industrial valley in which North Church is situated, closed down. A growing number of poorer families, many of them African-American, began to move in. Although membership began its sharp decline shortly afterwards, the church at first minimized these changes. A special Church School Committee concluded in 1960,

Though some claim that our Sunday Church is decreasing numerically and at an alarming rate, we find Church School records inadequate to guide us to reliable judgments in the area of statistics. (“1960 Annual Report of North Presbyterian Church”)

A few years later, however, Rev. Larry Shonfelt reluctantly admitted in his Annual Report, “a decline in membership, attendance and giving” and blamed it on “[t]he political controversy and racial conflict which was so much a part of our national life in 1964 [and] was reflected in tensions and misunderstandings in North Church.” But Rev. Shonfelt hoped and prayed “that God may correct our errors and heal our hurts in order that North Church may move forward to fulfil her mission with unflagging zeal and unreserved devotion.” (1964 Annual Report of North Presbyterian Church)

The church did make an effort to address these dramatic changes in its environment. For a period, pastoral teaching emphasized concerns for racial and social justice and there was an ambitious attempt at an outreach program to the disaffected youth of the community which lasted about five years. But the result was that even more members felt that this was not the church it once was, membership declined even further, pastors were embroiled in conflict and forced to resign, and eventually the church developed a kind of fortress or sanctuary mentality, seeking to preserve the resources it had and serve those who remained. For North Church, the years from 1955 to 1970 were a time of crisis.

1970 - 1995: “Seeking a New Identity”

In order for an organization to survive the challenge and crisis of discontinuous change, it is necessary to move back into a period of relative stability before attempting to undergo any redevelopment, or even more dramatically, transformation (Roxburg:56). This stability came to North Church through the 1973-1985 pastorate of Rev. Robert Rademaker who shifted the focus of the congregation to spiritual growth through worship, bible study, healing services and lay renewal events. Although there continued to be elements of crisis (conflict over the purchase of an organ with a loan from the endowment fund and personal issues with the pastor) and the focus was more inward than outward, these years provided the space for some key lay persons — a clerk of Session and the Christian Education Director — to raise once again the question of what the mission of the church was and should be. During this period, in fact, from the early

1970's to the mid 1990's, the church produced no less than five separate mission statements. These were clearly years when the church was wrestling with the question of identity. "Who are we? What kind of church are we? What kind of church do we need to be in light of our changed circumstances?" It was in the midst of these years of seeking identity, 1987, that I became pastor of North Church.

Each of these mission statements produced a renewed commitment, primarily among the church's leaders, to live that mission out. The most intense effort came in the early 1990's and included congregational focus groups, a detailed geo-demographic study of the immediate neighborhood, and consultations with church redevelopment experts. This process resulted in a challenge to the congregation to "decide to decide"—a call to enter a specific discernment process on God's leading for the future which would involve committed prayer, more consultations with "experts," and a focus on personal spiritual formation. In a somewhat haphazard way, the church eventually engaged in most of the elements of congregational self-study suggested by Carl S. Dudley et.al. (*Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), including ultimately serving as a "lab site" for a McCormick Theological Seminary D.Min. class on Congregational Revitalization taught by Dudley in the fall of 1994.

The result of this focused attention on implementing a new mission was a discernable and important shift from programs and ministries benefitting primarily church members to programs serving the larger community. It was during these years that a new after-school program for neighborhood children launched the youth ministry that now attracts both youth of the church and a large number of unchurched children and youth from the neighborhood; when Session adopted an "open door policy" which literally unlocked the doors to the church and has led to our facilities being in almost constant use by various community groups; and when North Church helped establish the ecumenical community ministry which continues to thrive as a model agency in the city.

There was, however, also disappointment. Membership continued to decline. While it has slowed significantly from the sixties and seventies, yet for all these efforts, it has not turned around. The questions we've generally asked about that fact are, What do we need to do to reverse this trend? Are we doing the wrong things, or not doing them well enough? Do we need better or a different style of worship? Do we need to reorganize for better church operation and administration? Do we need to offer better classes, different programs? Are we not "spiritual" enough, Christ-centered enough, Holy Spirit-empowered enough? Do we need to improve our facilities to make them more attractive, accessible, functional? In other words, what do we need to change or improve about ourselves and what we are doing to result in church growth? These are all questions generated by the church growth, church marketing, congregational development and seeker church movements, elements of which have influenced—in most cases positively—how the church has tried to respond to its changing circumstances. But these same questions also set the stage for discovering that "better isn't enough" (Hudson) and for nurturing seeds that have been planted along the way for a paradigm change to becoming a missional church.

1995 - 2005: Learning to Become Missional

As early as 1992, the notion was being raised that the future of North Church might look substantially different from the past. As facility maintenance issues and expenses grew to dominate the church budget and outpace congregational giving, some members occasionally fantasized, “What would happen if our building burned down and we had to start over as a congregation from scratch? What would we do different?” At a congregational meeting in November 1992, the commitment to enter the discernment process about the church’s future was announced with the possibility of a break from the past.

Is it possible to be a church for which there is a future and a hope? Absolutely yes! As long as we’re willing to hear, follow, and do what God asks. It may mean giving up old ways of doing things. It may mean doing things in new ways, different ways. (Pastor’s address, Congregational Meeting, November 11, 1992).

A few years later, in 1996, not only was the Mission Statement revised to place greater emphasis on what the church was *becoming*, rather than on what it was *doing* (from “*Building a Christian Community in Northside*” to “*Learning to Live the Love of Christ*”), but for the first time the Session approved a “Vision Statement” — a clear and precise picture of the way things ought to be. This vision statement, which spoke of being an “extraordinary community of believers,” and racial and cultural diversity and “kingdom transformation” foreshadowed key missional themes of being, in the language of Lesslie Newbigin, a “foretaste and signpost of the kingdom of God.” It is that image of the church, which I first encountered in 1996 in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds.) which has increasingly shaped my leadership of the congregation over the past 10 years.

Since the fall of 2001, after completing the core seminar in Columbia Theological Seminary’s new Gospel and Culture Doctor of Ministry program, I have been engaging this congregation I pastor in an intentional process of transformation, which I’ve characterized as “The Hopeful Journey of North Presbyterian Church Toward Becoming a Missional Church.” This trajectory of missional change was first introduced to the church’s core leadership in a weekend retreat in October 2001. Since that time, I have sought to advance the change process through two primary means: 1) the casting of a missional rationality which would come to define and shape our commitments and corporate life, and 2) renewed attention to the practice of genuine Christian community. These two transformation strategies have included a class on the characteristics of a missional church, sermons and articles incorporating and defining missional language and images, a new engagement of Scripture by a majority of the congregation, two Lenten studies which have focused on and began to implement mutuality and the practice of Christian friendship, and on-going dialogue with the church’s leadership about the nature and challenge of being a missional church. The response to both the notion of transformation and the concept of missional church has shifted from mildly resistant and disinterested to curious, accepting, and most recently, anticipation for what’s next. In February of 2004, I led the staff, elected officers and other identified leaders of the church through a one-day workshop entitled “Leadership for the 21st Century Church.” The purpose of the retreat was to move the church’s leaders beyond the stage of awareness to engagement in our missional transformation

journey. The workshop itself was also an exercise in the central task of missional leadership as I've come to understand it, which is the creation of culture.

In the spring of 2004, the Session approved an eighteen-month project to engage the entire congregation in embracing more fully a missional identity. The first phase of this project was the Lenten Study described above on the dynamics of change and the church's own journey of change over its 150-year history. The second phase was the formation of "Missional Engagement Teams" — task forces which were intended to act as catalysts for missional transformation of the culture of the congregation. This process was adapted from a model developed by Allen Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, called "Cultivating Missional Change" and is described in *Christendom Thinking to Missional Imagination*.

From mid-April to mid-June, I led the Session to understand and define this missional transformation process. Over several meetings we discerned three areas of focus for the METs and outlined a plan on how to form the teams and engage the congregation in that process. The remainder of the summer was focused on communicating this MET process to the congregation in a variety of creative ways — "Minutes for Mission" (in the form of creative skits), written publications and focus groups — and presenting the call for members of the congregation to serve on the teams. In August, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey® was also completed by about 52% of the worshipping congregation. The results of the study were later distributed to the METs to provide a baseline for their understanding of the congregation. By the end of September, 3 METs had been formed and chartered. These were defined as:

1. An Extraordinary Community of Believers: *Our desire to be such a connected and caring community of believers who love Christ and one another, that people are drawn to Christ and transformed through our shared life.*
2. Kingdom Ambassadors and Agents: *Our urgency to become a congregation where everyone is involved in showing, telling, and inviting people to the life God intends and Christ makes possible.*
3. Transforming Membership: *Our need to create a high expectation and rich opportunities for every member to be a "fully devoted follower of Christ" who is maturing in faith, witness, and service.*

The task of these three teams was stated as: 1) *Discovering* what this looks like as a permanent culture change for our congregation; 2) *Discerning* what it will take to move the church in this direction; 3) *Designing* a "missional experiment" to get that movement going, and plant a seed for permanent change.

Over the past eight months, these three teams have been working with varying degrees of effectiveness. The Extraordinary Community team has been most active and has implemented a number of initiatives designed to deepen relationship among congregation members. The Transforming Membership team distributed a spiritual gift inventory to the entire congregation to encourage reflection about how members are involved in ministry and ministry of the church. The Kingdom Ambassadors team is proposing an outdoor outreach event in late summer to

connect with the church's immediate neighbors.

It is not clear if these activities can be described accurately as “missional experiments”; nor am I prepared to say that the Missional Engagement Teams have failed in the objective of promoting further missional transformation. In fact, the initial results of an evaluation of the impact of these teams on the transformation process shows that most of the congregation feels “positive,” “affirming” and “excited” about the perceived changes. Additionally, there is strong consensus that the Missional Engagement Teams played a key role in that transformation.

III The Process of North Church's Transformation Into A Missional Community

"Live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us."

Ephesians 5:2

The metaphor of "journey" is much more descriptive than the word "process" for describing the transformation through which this congregation has come over the past 10 years. While there were moments when action plans were designed and steps were taken, in truth, much of the change has had more of the character of an adaptive response than strategic planning. This has been at times frustrating, both for me as the primary change leader and to other leaders of the congregation. But this more organic approach to change is supported by both a systems framework and from a theological perspective.

Increasingly, students of organizational change are recognizing that genuine organizational transformation happens more like the successful emergence of a new species in the face of dramatic environmental changes than through the design and application of techniques. (E.g. "The answer [to guiding organizations through adaptive challenges] is not in detailed plans. One must learn to disturb organizations artfully." Pascale, et.al.:147).

Biblically, the Book of Acts offers an interesting "case study" of transformation for God's people. Acts does not provide an organizational blueprint which the church was to use for all time; rather, it tells the story of the emergence of the church out of the chaos, uncertainty, and change that on the one hand was already stirring in the time of Jesus, and on the other hand was being brought about by the fact of Christ. It was transformation which came about as the God's people responded to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the midst of tremendous cultural upheaval.

Like any journey, however, it is possible describe various stages or steps that were taken along the way. For North Church, the change journey over the last 10 years could be described in the following broad outline.

Discerning Missional Readiness. This period of seeking identity in the early to mid-1990's (described above) prepared the church for change. It was a time of coming to grips with the reality, in Jill Hudson's words, that "better isn't enough" and developing the will to change.

Applying a "Missional Hermeneutic" to the Church's History. Although not much discussed in "transformation strategies," I believe this has been a very important part of the dynamic of change. It involved reflecting on, and in some cases reinterpreting the history of the church theologically: How was God's leading evident in various periods of the church's history, and what could be discerned from that about God's intentions, past, present, and future for the church? On the one hand, it demystified the so-called "Golden Years" of the 1920s through 1960, and on the other hand, it gave a renewed sense of God's purpose and providence in the pioneering of the church. One key result of this kind of re-remembering was a renewed sense of God's divine leading that gives hope for the coming years.

Cultivating a Missional Understanding of the Church. This stage of study and discussion (also described above) about what it means to be missional, which began in 2001, provided the framework to consider what a new future might look like for North Church, and

thus set a direction for discerning God's leading for the present.

Developing Missional Structures and Practices. It is at this final state at which North Presbyterian Church finds itself as the congregation approaches its 150th anniversary in October of 2005. It's a great place to be. And "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). But in the meantime, the hopeful journey continues!

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