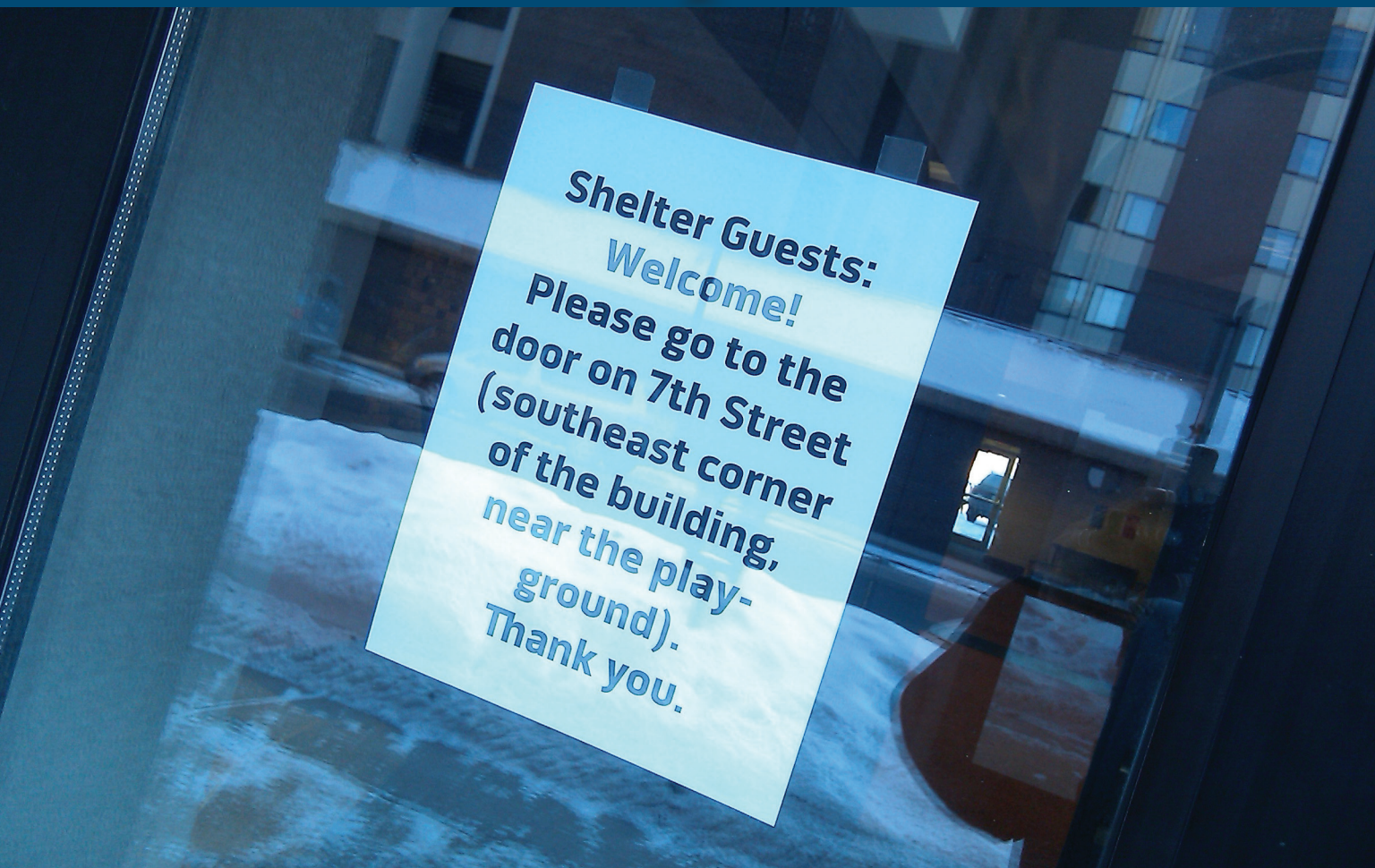


Facing Challenges with an Open Door



How a church rediscovered its mission by joining a city's movement to end homelessness.

DAN COLLISON

First Covenant, Minneapolis, used to be a big-time church. Nationally and internationally recognized preachers like E. A. Skogsbergh, Gustaf F. Johnson, Paul Rees, Paul Fryhling, and David L. Larsen left echoes of greatness rattling around more than 70,000 square feet of church building with a 1,500-seat sanctuary on virtually an entire downtown city block of real estate.

As with all churches, First Covenant experienced several seasons of decline and growth. The decline that began about fifty years ago was one they were able to slow but never abate. America as a whole was moving quickly into two decades of societal upheaval, ranging from the arts and social concerns to the

civil rights movement. Minneapolis was no exception. Yet during these years of rapid societal change, First Covenant itself changed very little with one exception: more than 90 percent of the church membership migrated to the expanding suburbs.

By 2009, average Sunday worship attendance had shrunk to less than seventy people. That courageous remnant called me to be their senior pastor while agreeing to intimidating words like “re-invention,” “re-development,” and “rebirth.” They even called their pastoral search team a “transition team.” We were an at-risk church facing a do-or-die reality. Our leadership received extensive coaching from the Northwest Conference and the Covenant congregational vitality team. There was little choice but to take on the urgency and entrepreneurial approach of a new church start.

The congregation responded with a wild mix of loud applause and a few gasps. Nothing like this had been done in the history of our church.

Typical of many church starts, our mission work became highly focused on our immediate surroundings.

As we stumbled our way through the first year of our re-start, the reality of our context—downtown Minneapolis—began to sink in: 1) We needed to develop into a multiracial congregation in a city with some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. 2) The population of downtown Minneapolis included poor people and rich people, but social stratification was lurking everywhere. 3) Very few people in our context even knew that our church existed. 4) In the beginning of our vitality work, the congregation understood little about the urban realities surrounding our church building.

My first six months at the church felt like a string of “getting to know each other” conversations: “Minneapolis, here is First Covenant; First Covenant, here is Minneapolis.” It was



In addition to providing a place to sleep, First Covenant serves dinner and breakfast during the six months it serves as a shelter to the homeless in the Twin Cities.

overwhelming and at first discouraging. I met with the mayor of Minneapolis and the chief of police, neither of whom had even heard of our church. In conversations with other civic leaders, businesspeople, and neighbors, the moment I mentioned I was a pastor of a church, they looked

at me with incredulous expressions that ranged from cynical to outright

mistrust.

Not willing to give up, I made a personal commitment to be a positive civic leader on behalf of the city alongside my role as pastor. I joined the volunteer board of the East Downtown Council, which focuses on the economic development of our portion of the city. At my first meeting, a developer presented a four-color brochure of the Downtown East in a future state of total redevelopment with twenty-first-century guiding principles. It caused my heart to race with enthusiasm. I thought, “Yes! This is what First Covenant Church wants to be a part of!”

I quickly turned the booklet’s pages to see how First Covenant’s building fit into their visualization of a new twenty-first-century urban dream. My excitement must have given me blurred vision because at first glance I couldn’t see our build-

ing. I turned the map sideways, and then the other way. Then, as if I were reading a large map, I oriented myself to Chicago Avenue and traced it back past the Hennepin County Medical Center that is adjacent to our building and then toward the new retractable roof stadium that replaced the aging Metrodome, and (long pause) it wasn’t there. Our building was gone!

Feeling a little frustrated and hurt, I settled down and then quietly asked myself, “Well, why should it be there? What transformational twenty-first-century change do we have to offer the East Downtown of Minneapolis?” These questions gripped my imagination daily and on occasion kept me from sleeping at night.

So I committed to another round of meetings, this time with leaders of faith communities who had reputations for being both knowledgeable of the city and effective in organizing their congregations to bring transformational change and renewal. My research took me to the doorsteps of leaders from Christian traditions outside the evangelical framework, as well as to Jewish and Islamic traditions.

To paint a full picture of what happened, let me back up to August 2009. I was one month into my role at First Covenant when I received an invitation to join the Interfaith Downtown Senior Clergy Network. My first meeting with the interfaith

leaders was at Temple Israel, and I would be lying if I didn't confess that I was a little nervous. This was particularly true because my mother's family is Jewish, but my mother converted to Protestant Christianity as a young woman and that carried with it many complexities within her family.

In addition to my own family history, I had spent more than forty years in evangelical churches that emphasized debate rather than dialogue with people of other faiths. I was taught a winner-takes-all mentality, and I had rarely witnessed healthy examples of interfaith friendships.

As I joined the table of the congregations of downtown Minneapolis, I quickly searched for a new model of relating to people of other faith traditions. Thankfully, a new reality had already existed in the Covenant as far back as the beginning stages of our denomination. Remembering F. M. Johnson's sermon quoting Psalm 119:63 at the founding meeting of the Covenant Church, "I am a companion of all who fear you," I joined the dialogue with Jewish blood in my veins and a Covenant worldview. I was warmly received, and our monthly meetings have been refreshingly authentic and friendly.

Our interfaith friendships work because everyone at the table has an understanding that we are friends who have a deep and reverential awe of God. We are committed to a common mission goal of loving God and loving neighbor with a priority on compassion, mercy, and justice.

In time my friends began to answer some of my most pressing questions about Minneapolis. They were seasoned leaders. Most of them have accomplished significant results in several areas, but often our conversations returned to the lingering effects of the 2007-2009 recession. Homelessness was ravaging the Twin Cities with more than 4,000 people experiencing homelessness annually in our county alone. The problem loomed

large and was by far the city's most immediate social concern. Thankfully, the clergy network had been working on practical solutions for several years, and they invited First Covenant to join them in their newly established network called Downtown Congregations to End Homelessness (DCEH).

The network was an ideal bridge for our church to jump into work that mattered greatly to our city. DCEH had capacity where we did not. It is true that First Covenant had experienced modest numeric growth during our rebirth, but we were still a small congregation barely getting a grasp on our new vision for mission. Capacity questions haunted us such as, "How can we start a ministry to the Minneapolis homeless population when we are struggling just to recruit ushers and musicians for our worship services?" and "What do we know about solving homelessness anyway?" DCEH gave us the answer: join others who are already doing the work well.

At first our involvement was meager. We attended organizational gatherings. We encouraged our congregation to volunteer with organizations that directly served the homeless.

Then the unexpected occurred.

The Salvation Army Harbor Light is the largest provider of ministry and services to the homeless in Minnesota. In the wake of accelerating homelessness, Hennepin County had released funding for the Salvation Army to operate a six-month winter overflow shelter at a site of their choosing, but it had to be a church because of city codes.

A few volunteers from First Covenant were walking with a homeless

rescue street team connected to the DCEH when the team's conversation turned to the new Salvation Army overflow site. They realized that our building was a perfect location because of its proximity to other key social services for the homeless. Additionally, our fellowship hall, located in the lower level of the education building, was large, had a commercial type kitchen, three bathrooms, and ideal entrances and exits to facilitate secure sign-in and checkout.

That conversation led to an onsite



Guests gather in the fellowship hall for conversations with each other and church members.

meeting and a flurry of phone calls, and in quick order a partnership proposal was drafted for our congregation to consider: a six-month, seven-day-a-week winter shelter for fifty guests, single women and men aged eighteen and older. The Salvation Army would provide the staff, assign the guests, and cover the cost of paper products and additional cleaning supplies. First Covenant needed to provide the space, food, and volunteers to serve dinner and breakfast meals. We knew it would be a major stretch for us, but it actually seemed doable.

The immediate problem, though, was timing. The shelter needed to be opened immediately. We had to decide "yes" or "no" quickly so the Salvation Army could move on to other

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possibilities if we did not accept their invitation.

Our staff and leadership team held special meetings. The leadership team offered their preliminary approval with the understanding that in the upcoming Sunday worship service I would communicate clearly to the congregation what was going to happen.

There are very few times in the life of a congregation where everything

our neighbor as ourselves, that must mean at least a 50/50 split. Take our building, for instance. Do we invest 50 percent of our building on our neighbors in downtown Minneapolis?”

I went on to explain the situation—that many of the established homeless shelters in the city were at 175 percent capacity, that more than 300 people were exposed to the weather in the downtown alone, and that our leadership had agreed to act as a temporary site for fifty people from now until the end of April.

The congregation responded with a wild mix of loud applause and a few gasps. Nothing like this had been done in the history of our church. For some, attempting such a project in a church turnaround situation sounded like insanity. For others, it was exactly what we needed to catalyze more passion and

movement toward our urban context. The risk was worth it.

The fact is, we had no idea what we were getting into. There were zero dollars budgeted. We had only a few weeks to prepare. Most of the congregation was enthusiastic, but there were a few naysayers. And during the first two months, something went wrong two to three times a week.

In those beginning days, our work was more about perspiration than inspiration. We raced to obtain written and verbal support of surrounding businesses and neighborhood associations before appearing for a vote at City Hall. We had to ensure that our fellowship hall would meet city code requirements for operation. (Thankfully, the only major additions we needed were a new fire alarm system

and a few signs.) Working alongside the Salvation Army staff, we processed the necessary paperwork for the required “interim conditional use permit” we needed to operate the shelter legally.

The Salvation Army provided large blue sleeping mats, and we provided chairs for each guest and room dividers for the men to sleep on one side of the room and the women on the other. It was unfortunate that we did not have any showers, but the Harbor Lights shelter and other nearby organizations were able to provide showers during daytime hours. The schedule would be: 6 p.m. check-in, 6:30 dinner, 10 p.m. lights out, 6 a.m. wake-up and breakfast, 7 a.m. closure. This schedule was developed largely because we had to synchronize our hours with those of our Metrokids Early Childhood Center that opens at 7:30 a.m. and closes at 5:30 p.m. The idea was that there would be thirty minutes between families leaving with children and guests coming for shelter, and vice versa in the morning.

As you might imagine, there was little time to recruit enough volunteers to provide dinner and breakfast seven days a week. Thankfully, two new young adult women in our congregation had a phenomenal drive and passion to build a volunteer system for the shelter that included people and organizations from all over the Twin Cities. Dozens responded! To everyone’s amazement we were able to open the shelter on the night of the fifth worst snowstorm in Minnesota’s history. Perfect timing!

Two months into the shelter work I awakened to a beautiful reality—our friendships with our guests were beginning to deepen. Dinner conversations were warm, craft activities were fun, and some guests even chose to join our new gospel choir. Sunday mornings were transformed into a dynamic exchange of conversations and introductions. Several guests



Mats given by the Salvation Army serve as the beds. The church put up room dividers to provide a section for men and one for women.

changes in one moment. One such moment occurred for First Covenant Church on Sunday, November 7, 2010. Near the end of my sermon, I read Matthew 22:37-39: “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (NIV).

Then I said, “We are to love God with 100 percent of our being and we are to love and care for others 100 percent as much as we love and care for ourselves. Since we consider the two greatest commandments to be God’s two priorities, doesn’t it seem reasonable that we should invest at least 50 percent of our time and money on others? Surely, if we love



With only a few weeks to prepare, Jen Ptacek and Amy Lyon recruited and organized all the volunteers to prepare and serve the meals.

began attending worship services, and I noticed that some congregational members were beginning to form friendships with guests and moving beyond friendly conversations to actually assisting them to find permanent housing solutions.

Of course, not everything worked well. During the first three weeks, the bathrooms were overused and created a serious sewer backup problem. Until we were able to establish an emergency response process for maintenance matters, I was receiving phone calls at 5 a.m., having multiple consultations with our facility manager who was getting lots of practice with the Roto-Rooter!

Other challenges occurred when guests entered the building through the wrong doors or left cigarette butts and other garbage on our children's playground. One guest left a vodka bottle in our lobby phone booth, and another broke the glass to the shelter entrance door in frustration because the opening had been delayed. Occasionally guests were asked to leave for disciplinary reasons. In one instance, a war veteran was asked to leave the shelter because of his unruly behavior, only to show up one Sunday morning across the street with a huge sandwich sign that said, "First Covenant Church treats veterans like dirt."

That is not the kind of marketing that you hope for! We sent a staff person out to the man with a cup of coffee, but he declined, saying, "No,

thank you. If I take that coffee, it will be a conflict of interest!" In moments like that all we could do was stay lighthearted and keep everything in perspective. The key to our shelter's success has been everyone's quick and calm response to all challenges. In each situation, a solution was quickly identified, helpful signage was added, broken items were repaired, and life went on.

In January 2011, I began hosting a coffee hour where I sat and talked with guests. I was a little anxious at first, but eventually I was able to relax into the highly unpredictable flow of our conversations. Their stories were gripping and raw. I learned that several guests had jobs but not enough income to rent an apartment. A few struggled with addictions but talked transparently about them. One man grew up in the Florida foster care system before making his way to Minneapolis on the promise of employment. But the employment fell through, and because he had only a small amount of cash, he was on the street within a few days.

A few guests joined the church. Many obtained permanent housing and left the shelter but came back to continue their life with our congregation. To everyone's delight the shelter became more than a place to get physical help; it became a place to belong. In all these ups and downs, First Covenant Church was beginning to experience the rewards of radical

hospitality. The late Henri Nouwen described it well: "Hospitality is the virtue which allows us to break through the narrowness of our own fears and to open our houses to the stranger....Hospitality makes anxious disciples into powerful witnesses, makes suspicious owners into generous givers, and makes close-minded sectarians into interested recipients of new ideas and insights."

We are now at the end of our second year of hosting the seasonal shelter in partnership with the Salvation Army and Hennepin County. We still face the stark realities of very limited funding and a heavy reliance upon the generosity and volunteerism of other churches and organizations to make it all work. But this time we were more equipped to face our challenges because we have learned three key lessons:

1) *Relevant contextualized ministry is critically important to a congregation's mission.*

Like a scratched compact disc stuttering on the same two seconds of sound over and over again—churches in complex and rapidly changing contexts get stuck trying to do the same ineffective mission practices hoping for different results. First Covenant Church was only a few years from closing its doors when God put into motion an amazing string of events that have now put us on a path of revitalization. There is no question in my mind that the most important reason for our success is that we have committed ourselves to recontextualize our mission. As we have done so, new people have jumped into congregational life.

Practically speaking, our recontextualization has meant that we recruited new ministry staff including a black gospel artist-in-residence, transformed Sunday worship into a dynamic and eclectic experience,

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