

How a Covenant congregation found a new home in an old church

A FIRM FOUNDATION

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JUST AFTER EIGHT O' CLOCK, on an overcast Sunday morning in Arlington, Massachusetts, the big blue doors of the white church near the town center were unlocked and opened. A half dozen church members were already hard at work inside, having entered an hour earlier through a side door.

Church members had been busy for some time—days and weeks of moving, cleaning, organizing, and painting—all in preparation for what was about to happen in an hour and a half. On February 5, 2006, Highrock Church, which had joined the Covenant in 2003, would hold its inaugural service in its first, permanent, collectively prayed for and purchased house of worship.

The church building located on the 700 block of Massachusetts Avenue is the oldest such structure in all of Arlington, a town west of Boston and sandwiched between Cambridge (Harvard's home) and Lexington (where

Minutemen and British Redcoats got into a fray and started the Revolutionary War). Built in 1841 as a Universalist church, its original congregation had previously met in a hall above an old bakery, in a building unintended for worship services.

The church's new congregation has a similar history. Highrock began in May 1999, when less than a dozen believers gathered together for prayer and Bible study at a small suburban home in Needham, on a street called High Rock. A diverse mix of backgrounds and ages, this small group envisioned a church community where Christ would be preached and grace would be extended to all. A month later, now numbering twenty, they began meeting in the common room of a house in Cambridge.

While at its first public meeting place—the YWCA in Central Square—members decided on the name “Highrock” for their church, a reminder of

God's answered prayer from uncertain beginnings. Soon afterwards, anticipating future growth and seeking a more permanent place to serve, Highrock moved to Somerville, renting the basement fellowship hall of a Methodist church (eventually moving upstairs to the sanctuary), and holding services for the first time in a church building on Sunday nights.

Sharing a facility with another congregation was problematic at times. There were minor inconveniences, such as poor parking and a less than ideal service time; and areas of greater concern, like the rundown and cramped conditions of the children's classrooms and the limits on use of the building, which hampered ministry. So in 2001, Highrock began a building search.

There are many things a church body must consider when it chooses to move to a new building: location, size and cost, and appropriateness of the building for ministry. For Highrock,

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A scene from the first day of worship at the new Highrock Church building

The front of Highrock Church's new home

the search continued for years, with committee members visiting virtually every potential church in the surrounding areas for possible leads with little success. (Boston's space constraints made constructing a new church impossible.)

When the Catholic archdiocese of Boston began its unfortunate parish closings a few years ago, more opportunities arose. Indirectly, it was because of these newly vacant churches that Highrock found its home. The local Greek Orthodox church, which had occupied the white church on Massachusetts Avenue since 1969, purchased a Catholic church a mile down the road. After hearing of Highrock's vision for ministry in Arlington, the Orthodox church agreed to sell their building to the Covenant congregation.

Rob Hall, the associate of land, facilities, and finance for the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism, assisted with the search and helped figure

out all the financial details. The local conference gave support, advice, and direction. After more than five years of praying and searching, and following many frustrations and dead ends, Highrock had found a home.

Since its inception, the church built by the Universalists has always been pointed out by locals as "the white church"—one of the few things that did not change over the years. Originally constructed with a different footprint and featuring a square tower, following the Civil War the church was expanded twelve feet in front, its entire structure raised three feet, and a steeple replaced the tower. The hurricane of 1938 nearly blew the steeple over, necessitating the replacement of the spire with a copper dome—one which was subsequently painted blue.

Transience and change are a huge part of Boston and its satellite towns—like most urban centers, there is constant movement. Beantown's large

student and young adult populations make the ebb and flow of those comings and goings especially dramatic. This makes having a long-term stable setting for Highrock's ministry all the more attractive.

"Our generation is not very good at making commitments," says Pastor Dave Swaim, Highrock's pastor since July 2000. "But the fact is that they've never had anyone who has made and kept commitments to them. They see all these things in society—marriages that don't last, politicians who lie, churches that split—and they've learned that nobody keeps their commitments. So it's silly to ask people to make a commitment to somebody who won't make one back with them."

While moving into converted warehouses or office buildings has become an attractive alternative for new churches, Swaim fears such places give

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A new church sign welcomes the community to Highrock Church.



the appearance of being temporary and transitory. Instead, he points to the new church's foundation, which is set in solid stone.

"To me that says, 'We're here to stay, we're on a mission, we're not going anywhere,'" Swaim explains.

Swaim looks forward to the day his young children are baptized inside the sanctuary and anticipates their weddings there as well—many years down the road. He has challenged the congregation, most in their twenties and thirties, to join him in buying homes in the town, investing their lives, time, and money as a part of this commitment to the community.

Another principle behind Highrock's vision for its new home is an old one—as Ecclesiastes reminds us, "There's nothing new under the sun." Moving into the oldest church building in town is a vivid, visible reminder of the long history of faith, and a reminder of the unity that has existed for centuries of worshiping the same God and living in the same sort of Christ-centered community.

"Our credibility lies in our shared history of the church," Swaim says. "It is our claim to authenticity and author-

ity—and our experience in the community echoes that of Christians who for centuries have been Christ for their own communities."

He adds, "The point is—we're not doing something new, we're doing something old."

One hundred sixty-five years ago, the original congregation bought the plot of land where the Highrock Church now stands for \$440. A sizable portion of the property was actually donated by a parishioner, one who also supplied wood from his own mill to contribute to the woodwork ornamentation of the church. Others also gave sacrificially so that their church could be built.

Leading up to the February move-in date, the Highrock community responded to finally having something they could own and invest in.

"So many people came together with all their gifts," says Swaim, "and so many different things were needed."

The congregation responded to meet all of these needs. Volunteers scrubbed the floors, rooms, and kitchen. They vacuumed, repainted, and decorated. They figured out the financing, organized the logistics of the move, connected the speakers and

set up the high-tech audio equipment, and created a welcoming space in the fellowship hall featuring artwork from church members. Moving trucks and dozens of volunteers transferred all of the equipment, books, chairs, tables, and furniture from Somerville to Arlington. The last of it was moved following the last service in the old building, a week before the opening day.

"It was a beautiful expression of the whole body working together," says Swaim. "We asked people to do far above and beyond what was reasonable, and people went far above that."

In fact, several people who came on Saturday morning, February 4, ended up staying past four the next morning, skipping lunch and dinner as they thoroughly cleaned and prepared the sanctuary for worship.



Church members pitched in to get the new building ready to open.

Helping Churches Find a Home

Finding the right location for ministry is crucial to the long-term health and effectiveness of a congregation. Steve Dawson and Rob Hall—the land, facilities, and finance staff of the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism—specialize in helping congregations make this important decision, and in helping them see a church building as a tool for ministry.

Dawson and Hall assist churches in assessing land/facility opportunities in the church's service area. They can also shepherd churches through the negotiation, contract, due diligence, and closing phases of a property purchase. Through the entire process, the staff works in partnership with a church to find the best site available at the right price.

The Church Growth and Evangelism team has assisted many churches in designing and building church facilities. For that reason, they try to help a church see "the forest instead of just the trees." Their experience can help a church learn what has worked and what has not worked in the past.

Currently, the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism is working with more than \$100,000,000 worth of site acquisition and construction projects for Covenant churches throughout the United States and Canada.

For more information, contact Joanne Nelson in the Department of Church Growth and Evangelicalism at 773-907-3354, joanne.nelson@covchurch.org. □

At nine-thirty in the morning, with the curved, wooden pews packed to near capacity, the first service at Highrock's new home began with an opening prayer and a praise song asking Jesus to take his place in the sanctuary. Josh Throneburg, the young adult pastor, prayed for the children before dismissing them to their safe, spacious, and brightly painted rooms. Eugene Kim, associate pastor, led worship, accompanied by musicians and vocalists from the congregation.

Pastor Swaim preached from Acts, recalling Saul's road to Damascus experience and reminding the congregation that conversion is only the *starting* point. Just as Christ led Saul into the Christian community, so also must we be led to community to truly begin to see who Jesus is.

He then spoke of Ananias, who in Acts 9 came and laid hands on Paul—so that Paul would be healed from his blindness. Swaim spoke of the need

to emulate Ananias's faithfulness and obedience to God's call, and envisioned what the future might look like for Highrock: Bible studies, family nights open to the whole town, a free medical clinic, and coffeehouses ministering to Arlington's youth. Finally, Swaim told of his own coming to faith years ago, partly on account of a man from Arlington who obeyed God by caring for and sharing about the Bible with Swaim and others, when they were high-school students.

"My dream is that we will make a difference here," Swaim said. "Aside from our own experience of community together, after a few years I want people in the neighborhood, even those who don't attend our church, to feel that our presence here has made this community a better, more beautiful place. And I dream that this will speak winsomely to them about who our God really is."

The sun finally peered out from be-

hind gray clouds. Its rays shone through the stained-glass window in the rear wall of the sanctuary, and the image of a cross reflected onto the floors of the church, where all around, Highrock was worshipping. □



The doors to Highrock Church officially opened on February 5.



Q: Where do you call when you don't know where to call?

A: Covenant Resource Center

The Covenant Resource Center connects individuals with resources and information, including books, brochures, displays, "how-to" materials, curriculum resources, sample job descriptions and mission statements, information on ministry trends, Covenant statistics, recommended ministry practices, and much, much more. Our courteous and knowledgeable staff are waiting to help you find what you're looking for.



Phone 800-338-IDEA (4332)
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