

WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

From ‘raising good church people’ to ‘becoming good disciples’

A church sells its building to make way for affordable housing and a new worshipping community.

BY PAUL SEEBECK

Arlington Presbyterian Church in northern Virginia is a mile from the Pentagon. Average per capita income in the area is about \$100,000. Households with an income of \$60,000 a year are being forced out of their own neighborhood by high and rising rents.

These changing demographics are shaping not only the community; they’re also shaping the future of Arlington Presbyterian.

When pastor Sharon Core arrived at the church in December 1998, her primary work with session leaders was to help them see themselves as the spiritual leaders of the church rather than an administrative body.

“As we made this shift together, we began to discern that what we were doing wasn’t working anymore,” says Core. The church was one of the first congregations in National Capital Presbytery to participate in the presbytery’s Transforming Congregations project. The process continued for several years through various iterations, including working with a consultant from the ecumenical Center for Parish Development.

At a retreat in 2009, the session and ministry-team leaders discerned a vision that led them to propose to



Arlington Presbyterian Church, led by pastor Sharon Core, far left, takes worship into the community on Palm Sunday morning.

the congregation that the church property be repurposed, with a new church being part of an affordable-housing development. A firestorm of controversy and conflict ensued.

Recognizing that they had failed to establish the groundwork and reasoning behind the idea, they tabled the proposal.

In 2010 Arlington’s presbytery suggested that they try a Presbyterian Mission Agency

discernment and assessment tool known as New Beginnings. It would provide a close look at the congregation’s financial and spiritual health, neighborhood demographics, and capacity for change.

“New Beginnings helped the entire congregation recognize that something needed to change,” says Core. “That gave us the clarity to focus our efforts on what our mission should be in our neighborhood.”

Spotlight showcases the places where God is breathing life into the church and the world beyond, and shares stories with four themes: disciples, visionaries, worshipping communities, and what’s next.



Arlington Presbyterian invited Shannon Kiser, who at the time was a new church development coach, to work with the congregation in 2012.

The first thing Kiser did was form a vision team that would commit to these practices:

- Daily Scripture reading
- Daily prayer, including prayer focusing on Matthew 9:38 (“Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into [God’s] harvest.”)

• Conversations with people in the neighborhood, listening “for whom our hearts are breaking”
 “These missional practices helped us see and hear how God was speaking,” says Kiser, now a 1001 New Worshiping Communities associate in the program’s East region.

Kiser and the vision team lived into these practices throughout last summer, when Core was on a three-month sabbatical.

“By not relying on our pastor to tell us what to do, we gained confidence in our own ability to listen to God day-to-day,” says vision team chair Susan Etherton.

When Core returned, the vision team was full of stories about the people they’d met who lived and worked along Columbia Pike, where the church is located.

“We were drawn to those who couldn’t afford to live here, even though they worked nearby,” says Etherton. “People wanted a deeper sense of belonging and community where they lived and worked.”

Members of the congregation had discovered the ones for whom their hearts were breaking.

“It was like ‘Oh my gosh, we’ve come full circle to affordable housing,’” says Core. “It’s as if God was saying to us, ‘Now you know why there was energy there and why you’re going to do this.’”

It took nearly two more years of work, but in January members of National Capital Presbytery

unanimously approved the sale of Arlington Presbyterian Church to an affordable-housing development partnership for \$8.4 million.

If everything stays on schedule, the affordable-housing development will close in July 2016. New construction will begin after demolition of the church building in early 2017, with completion scheduled for 2019.

Arlington Presbyterian is now deciding whether it will rent worship space in the housing development. The congregation is working with an affordable-housing project manager who recently completed a project with a Baptist congregation in neighboring Clarendon.

Acknowledging the “unfortunate reality” that many urban and suburban congregations can no longer maintain their real estate, Jill Norcross says that “affordable housing is a way for them to give something back to the community.”

“We’re trying to reach the lowest income group possible, but most of the units will be for those making \$60,000,” she says.

Arlington Presbyterian has also hired a mission developer to help it understand how to meet neighbors’ desires for deeper connection and belonging—which could be the focus of a new worshiping community that may emerge from the sale.

“There is a remnant of folks who want to be part of this,” says

Etherton. “It will probably be about half of what our current attendance [40] has been.”

“We don’t need a building to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our neighborhood,” says Etherton, who raised her two college-aged children there and, like Core, was married in the church. “Arlington Presbyterian has been a vibrant faith community serving our neighborhood for over 100 years. We will continue to do so, building or no.”

Adds Core, “I get the [notion of a church] building as sacred space, but just because we have great memories [of life together in a church building], that is not a reason not to redevelop.

“I’ve shifted as a pastor. I’m no longer trying to raise good church people. To me, the beauty of church is people learning to listen to God and their neighbors and becoming good disciples in the community.”

Paul Seebeck is a Mission Communications strategist for the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

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