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## NEW LIFE FOR THE URBAN CHURCH BY THE REV. STERLING SEVERNS

She turned out the light in the hallway and wondered, “Where did they all go?” We both knew the answer to her question. The Education Building, once filled with the laughter of children, sits virtually empty. The devastating flight from our cities in the 1960s and ’70s wreaked havoc on our urban congregations. Desegregation of the public school system, crime and disillusionment with organized religion are all documented factors in the decline of the urban church.

It wasn’t always this way. The end of WWII served as a catalyst for unprecedented growth. New economic and educational opportunities, and the arrival of all those babyboomers, fueled an optimistic chapter in the American story. Likewise, the church thrived and, in many ways, mirrored the neighborhoods in which they were located. Sunday school, discipleship training and music and mission programs played key roles in the development of family life. Many of our churches in urban centers built large structures to embrace record growth and reap the benefits of new classrooms, larger sanctuaries and multiple corridors. Many of us now find ourselves wandering down those same hallways wondering, “What in the world have we gotten ourselves into?”

### *Blessing and curse*

The curse of this impractical physical space is a lack of financial resources, upkeep and management. The blessing is the story the space has to tell and the potential it still possesses. Many downtown churches folded, merged or moved to the suburbs. The result of these decisions seeded new opportunities for now-thriving ministries. A handful of church families literally held their ground and served faithfully through four decades of decline. The longevity of ministry and resulting stories are true testaments to God’s guidance amidst a great season of change.

### *Old spaces, new faces*

Simply stated, many of us in urban churches are growing again. The renewal of our cities marks a new day as socioeconomic and racial diversity abound. People are moving back into the city, and they are hungry for authentic community and meaningful relationships. The church stands ready to embrace a new form of urbanism.

We need to prepare ourselves for the resurgence of the downtown church. Are we ready to receive our neighbors? Are we willing to reframe the conversation and understanding of facility use in our churches? Will our immediate family, those persons active in weekly worship and Bible study, seek opportunities to connect with what is becoming our extended family?

### *First impressions*

Our neighbors first see our buildings as large fortresses with beautiful sanctuaries, long corridors and a myriad of classrooms. The second impression is the quality of hospitality we offer to those willing to venture inside. We’ve begun to figure out what to do with all of the space. Many of us already have assumed the role of host with numerous community organizations. Childcare centers, nonprofit offices, support groups, musical ensembles and teachers, food pantries, clothes closets, tutors, team sports, counselors, and many others have brought life back into our once-quiet corners. We are learning to share God’s house with a new generation of community servants.

Unfortunately, there tends to be a disconnect between these individuals and the church-at-large. Misunderstanding occurs when messes are made, “rent” is late or furniture is rearranged. Resentment sets in, particularly with childcare center families, when persons using the facility on weekdays don’t show up on Sundays. Renewal and relationships begin with the quality of our hospitality. Our motives should not center on growth but on our mission to

serve in Christian love. God is breathing life into the familiar places in our lives and unfamiliar persons are coming through the doors. I urge the church to embrace them and find ways to make them feel at home.

### *Hospitality*

You'd be amazed at what can be accomplished when people take the time to learn one another's names, serve one another and find creative ways to work together. For example:

- I'm guessing the piano teacher could use a hand with her recital next month.
- The Boy Scout troop is sponsoring a blanket drive in January; perhaps we should reach out to the entire family, immediate and extended alike, and ask everyone to join in?
- The secretary in the office upstairs just lost her father; we should put her on the prayer list and ask someone to send a card.
- The children in the childcare center have been working on some art projects related to Africa; perhaps we could use some of the images to help promote international missions next Christmas?
- Wouldn't it be nice if some of our members crocheted baby blankets and a couple of church members delivered them to the new family whose child is at the childcare center?
- The leader of the AA group that meets in the parlor has a birthday coming up. Perhaps we should send a card?

- Wouldn't it be nice to provide some cookies and punch for the Divorce Recovery Group as it concludes its last meeting together?
- I wonder if the Community Band would be willing to help us celebrate our next homecoming service?

Don't you wonder what it would be like if we all worked together to better the community God has placed us in?

Our large structures initially were built to embrace unprecedented growth. What if God has something more than numerical growth in mind? What if the purpose of the space is changing along with the neighborhood in which it is located? I pray our churches will become places where strangers become family and new partnerships are forged to serve. I thank God we have the opportunity to lead by example.

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