

Moving to the Carpenter's House

BY ELIZABETH M. BENTON

**By the time Briggs Church moved into its new building,
the congregation no longer needed the extra space.
Through twists and turns in its suburban life, the
congregation continues to discover new opportunities
for disciplined membership and faithful service.**

When I teach English at the high school and college level, I concentrate on helping my students learn to write and think persuasively. The classical term for this discipline is “rhetoric.” Rhetoric, according to a standard text in the field, aims to help us “close the gap between assent and action.”¹

In teaching students and talking with colleagues over the years about rhetoric, I have teased out a distinction that makes sense in many areas of life. It is the difference between simply eliciting a commitment or assent from someone and persuading that person to act. *Commitment* is satisfied when the other person makes a mental or emotional agreement with the issue at hand. *Persuasion* entails action.

This distinction has helped me understand the story of Briggs Church, formerly known as Briggs Memorial Baptist Church, in Bethesda, Maryland – my church home since 1992, except for brief sojourns in San Angelo, Texas, and Manhattan. The congregation, from its inception in 1951 down to the present day, has given witness to the power of persuasion and the infirmity of mere commitment.

CHASING THE SUBURBS

The church traces its roots back to the years following World War II when a group of Christians, primarily young adults, from a prominent

downtown Baptist church in Washington, DC, yearned for a more dynamic and socially challenging church experience. They were willing to leave the inner-city neighborhood and church where many of them had grown up. Some of the young men in the group had recently returned from service in the war, and many were newly married to spouses from other parts of the country. Together they felt persuaded to seek a fresh start in a new church.

After diligent prayer and careful analysis, they selected a piece of property between the capital city and the swiftly expanding suburb of Bethesda, Maryland. In time, the fifty or so individuals and families cobbled together \$20,000, a staggering sum at the time, to purchase the land. After meeting in a department store's community room, and then a small auditorium at American University, they broke ground for a building that would house their worship, Sunday school, church meals, and other social gatherings.

Like many other churches that have been started or replanted in a rapidly expanding part of the city, the Briggs congregation grew until it became necessary to contemplate building a much larger facility. "Bigger and better" dominated American culture at the time, including the church culture, and the deeply committed congregation felt persuaded to attach a new sanctuary to their existing structure, which was converted to a social hall. The result was a handsome colonial-style place of worship.

Ironically, by the time they moved into their new building, the congregation no longer needed the extra space. Like many other churches in the greater Washington, DC, area, Briggs had not understood the bewildering demographic equations coming into play; the church had located, fixed its boundaries, taken on a considerable mortgage, and settled in for the long haul, but only to watch the city's population keep pushing outward to new suburbs.

The downtown church had been the spiritual, as well as geographical, hub of its membership; however, the new location never achieved that same level of magnetism. The region around the church became increasingly affluent, and many young families who joined the church to take up the work of aging members could not afford to live near the church. Furthermore, as the original founders retired and moved away, the neighborhood did not feel drawn to the established Baptist church worshipping in a beautiful but increasingly empty building. In part this was due to the unfortunate "right-wing" connotation that the word "Baptist" acquired in Bethesda during the 70s and 80s as many evangelical groups, including the Southern Baptist Convention, became closely associated with political conservatism.

The original members remained committed to staying with the evolving congregation, for they loved Briggs Church and its history, memories, and buildings. But they did not have a persuasive vision to draw enough others to join the congregation and stem the decline in membership.

Fortunately, the church members skillfully managed their resources over the years. In the early 80s, they opened the church building to a com-

munity-based music conservatory and a Montessori preschool. The schools not only provided a needed source of income for the church, but also increased the church's visibility in the community and attracted many talented music teachers and students to grace its worship services. With careful shepherding of resources and faithful giving, the congregation remained on solid financial ground and poised for a rebirth of its founding dream.

Ironically, or providentially, because our church's membership was decreased yet had a deep desire to serve the world, a disciplined and ministry-oriented community became possible at Briggs.

In 1992, my father, Robert Maddox, came to be pastor of Briggs after he had served several pastorates in Georgia, a two-year stint on Jimmy Carter's White House staff, and an eight-year tour as Executive Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. A host of young adults joined the church

about this time, and we, the new generation of Briggs members, like those who launched the congregation in the early 50s, boldly set about to generate a fresh and viable faith community. Yet we encountered the same problems as the church's founding members: we came from all over the region and, try as we might, we did not succeed either in making the church a strong emotional hub or in attracting members from the surrounding neighborhoods. Soon, many members from this young generation drifted on to other churches due to job changes, marriages, and housing moves. Evolving styles of church life also took their toll.

Yet, as before, the commitment of the core group remained firm. To do more than simply survive, however, we needed a persuasive vision for the future of the congregation.

A NEW BEGINNING

Today the church bears little resemblance to the faith community of the early 1950s. Briggs Church's persuasive vision, its "call to action," is to be a new form of church in a new millennium. Just as my rhetoric students might draft a prospectus and explore issues in groups before they can effectively communicate a viewpoint, Briggs Church began brainstorming ways to re-focus the church and then call others to act in a way that is faithful to our community and to our Lord. In a roundabout way, the serendipitous outcome of this prayerful process would be the creation of the Carpenter's House.

Our path to the Carpenter's House can be traced back to my father's dissertation written at Emory University in the 70s. He had studied with

interest the Church of the Saviour, an ecumenical inner-city congregation founded by Gordon and Mary Cosby in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood of Washington, DC, in 1947. The Church of the Saviour is organized around an "inward journey" of loving God through specific disciplines of prayer, personal and corporate worship, study, use of money, and so on, and an "outward journey" of ministry to the community. New members have intern membership for up to three years before becoming covenantal members, and their covenantal responsibilities are renewed annually. Through the years, after much study, prayer, and meditation (the inward journey), the Church of the Saviour has launched numerous ministries to meet the profound needs of the city (the outward journey).²

Though belonging to a disciplined fellowship was always my father's dream, it had been practically impossible to realize his vision in the established congregations where he had served. Ironically, or providentially, because our church's membership was decreased yet had a deep desire to serve the world, a disciplined and ministry-oriented community became possible at Briggs.

For years, my father and the church leadership had "sounded a call," to borrow a phrase from the Church of the Saviour, for members to discern what God wanted them to do. Recently, several members began to listen for their own call with new intensity. For instance, one man with a gift for teaching English as a second language organized a week-day language program for immigrants, which is staffed almost entirely by volunteer teachers (many are retired professors from nearby schools) who in their own way have heard and answered a call to service. Another couple sounded a call for the congregation to support the Johenning community center in a distant, deprived area of the city. Older members of the congregation said, "We cannot drive over to the center but tell us what we can do." So, the seniors at Briggs began preparing holiday goodie bags and party fixings for the forty children at the center.

In August 2003, our small congregation at Briggs was straining to maintain its handsome building along with these and other ministries, when my father received a phone call from the pastor of a newly organized Korean Baptist congregation. Since "Briggs Church" was at the top of the phone book listings, Pastor Soon Choi had taken a chance and called to inquire if my father knew of any church congregation that would be interested in selling its buildings. Eighteen months later, in the providence of God, Briggs sold its building to Pastor Choi's congregation with the provision that Briggs could rent worship and program space in perpetuity.

As we prayed and labored our way through a bewildering array of denominational and financial thickets to close the deal, a house next to the church's parking lot became available. Mrs. Renee Carpenter had lived in the house for forty years. Recently she had worked in the weekday ESL program and established warm friendships with several church members.

When, due to severe illness, she needed to move to Florida, we immediately met her offer to purchase her house. Today Briggs Church conducts its day by day activities out of this renovated property, appropriately named “The Carpenter’s House.”

CONCLUSION

Language ministries continue to expand and possibilities for literacy training beckon. The seniors do not miss a beat providing long-distance care for children at the community center across town. Systematic interfaith dialogues are on the calendar. Progressive Bible and issue-oriented studies take place regularly in the Carpenter’s House along with a children’s ministry.

In the wake of the Katrina hurricane, Briggs opened a furnished two-bedroom suite to a mother and her daughter left devastated by the storm. From extra office space in the Carpenter’s House, important national ecumenical work is conducted.

Recently the Briggs congregation joined in several endeavors with a neighboring church with a shared vision of outreach. Giving the cup of cold water in Jesus’ name to a thirsty world is a more alive, energized possibility as the two congregations remain *persuaded*, as the United Church of Christ watchword proclaims, “God is Still Speaking.”

As I participated in this transforming process at Briggs, I often remembered Martin Luther King’s insight that “Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability, [but] it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God.” Therefore, he urges us to “use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”³

NOTES

1 Timothy W. Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell, *The Aims of Argument*, fifth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities, 2005), 7.

2 Elizabeth O’Connor’s *Call to Commitment and Inward Journey/Outward Journey* (available from www.pottershouseshousebooks.org) tell the story of how the Church of the Saviour responded to the social and racial changes in Washington, DC, after World War II. For more information about congregations and ministries associated with the Church of the Saviour today, see www.inwardoutward.org.

3 Martin Luther King, *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, 16 April 1963.



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