

Seeking hope in Detroit

Presbyterian congregations advance diversity and justice in a community struggling to survive.

By Laura Hedgecock



On July 18, 2013, the City of Detroit filed for bankruptcy. Once one of the largest and most prosperous cities in the country, booming with industry, Detroit has become shorthand for the urban crisis in the United States. In 1950, the city had a population of 1.8 million people; as of 2010, that number had dropped to a little over 700,000. Because so many industries hit hard times or pulled out of the city, jobs have become scarce. According to the US census, one in three Detroit residents lives in poverty.

But this is only part of the story. For Detroit is also a city in revival. Some businesses have begun to open new stores and even establish headquarters in the city. Plans for a new light-rail system are in place. Communities in both the city and the suburbs are showing signs of increased racial and economic diversity (though some question the sustainability of these trends). And Detroit remains, as it ever was, a city of art, music, and hope. These are not streets that breed hope. Hope is the determined, unyielding will of a people who demand better.



Southside Covenant Presbyterian Church hosts its annual community picnic, gathering together members of the community across differences in age and race.

Over the last few decades, those who could afford to move out to the suburbs—mostly white families—did so. Discriminatory housing practices helped create one of the most segregated cities in the nation. Like a knife through the city, Eight Mile Road divides the mostly white population to the north and the mostly African American inner-city population.

The church has been no stranger to these tensions. In 1940, non-Hispanic whites made up about 90 percent of the city's population. Now, over 80 percent of the population is African American, and urban Presbyterian congregations haven't always kept up with the changes. Meanwhile, the Presbytery of Detroit could be a poster child for diversity. Its more than 80 congregations cover five counties, encompassing some of the wealthiest zip codes in Michigan as well as some of the most impoverished. It includes communities that are 96 percent white as well as communities that are 96 percent African American. The metropolitan area is home to the second-largest Arab community outside of the Middle East, the largest Chaldean Catholic population outside of Iraq, and the 20th-largest Jewish population in the world. There are suburbs that personify multicultural, with more than 80 different languages spoken in homes. On their way to worship, some Presbyterians drive past Muslim, Jewish, Jain, Adventist, Baha'i, Orthodox, Catholic, Chaldean, and LDS houses of worship in addition to the usual assortment of mainline Protestant churches.



Children from Littlefield Presbyterian Church in Dearborn, Michigan, join with neighborhood Muslim children for a peace parade as part of the congregation's ongoing interfaith ministry.

Each worshiping community has grappled differently with issues of race and class—issues that can't be sugarcoated. Working together isn't always easy. There are tensions—racial, economic, and geographical. At the presbytery level, promoting diversity, ensuring a balance of representation, and power sharing are key. Many initiatives, including the structure of presbytery meetings, center on promoting personal interaction and relationships.

Power sharing and diversity have come easier for some congregations than others. Thirty-odd years ago, Jefferson Avenue Presbyterian Church was an older (dying) congregation. That all changed when the

church opened its doors to its neighbors, nearly 35 percent of which live below the poverty level. Now a thriving congregation, Jefferson Avenue focuses on the kids of Detroit, the revitalization of local neighborhoods, and increasing diversity. That journey has, remarkably, been without controversy. "Even when we disagree, we're still brother and sister," says longtime pastor Peter Smith.

Calvin East Presbyterian Church, which is 50 percent African American and 50 percent white, also has opened its doors to its neighborhood. Every Wednesday the church tutors 25 to 30 students, with suburban partner church First Farmington providing additional supplies. After homework is done, Calvin East hosts a dinner for the students, their parents, and other neighbors. The 80 to 100 regulars include residents from a nearby group home as well as several who are homeless.

Westminster Presbyterian Church was once an all-white church with leadership resistant to diversity. Change has required a lot of hard work. Members have had to let go of what the church used to be (which has involved creating space for grieving) and embrace a new reality. Today the congregation's very life together promotes power sharing. Everyone has an equal opportunity to pitch in. Each Sunday they share lunch together, stockbrokers serving side by side with homeless people. Some members live in the neighborhood, while others drive in from the suburbs. Some need bus fare to attend Bible study; others are affluent. They've also reached out to the surrounding neighborhood and its three schools. Members help with projects ranging from planting tomatoes to tutoring to hosting graduations in Westminster's sanctuary.

Some congregations, alternatively, are recognizing that they may never resemble their surrounding community but that they can reach out and forge partnerships. Littlefield Presbyterian Church in Dearborn, for instance, is located in a community that is approximately 75 percent Middle Eastern Muslim. Few of Littlefield's members live nearby; most drive in from other areas. So the congregation made a commitment to interfaith mission, launching a summer peace camp, which teaches church and neighborhood children respectful ways of resolving conflict and working together.

Other congregations are exploring how to honor the diversity already in their pews. In Southfield, two congregations, New Hope Presbyterian Church and Korean Presbyterian Church of Metro Detroit, share a campus, ministries, and education but have separate worship services and autonomous sessions. Korean Presbyterian began as a worshipping community for Korean immigrants. But as founding members aged, new generations were born, and English-speaking immigrants arrived, the congregation recognized the need for English-speaking ministries and chartered New Hope. Families have members on both sides: English-speaking grandchildren and great-grandchildren worship on one side, and grandparents worship on the other. Both congregations are immigrant based, sharing many mixed-race and bicultural (even tricultural) families with members from a wide socioeconomic spectrum. Prayer, conversation, and a commitment to sharing the love of Christ bring them together. They partner with inner-city Highland Park Presbyterian Church, joining in its tutoring and lunch fellowship. They also have global mission partners; they know that speaking the same language isn't a prerequisite to sharing in Christ's mission.

Yet other congregations are building on a historic commitment to community among the marginalized. The work of St. John's Presbyterian Church, the oldest African American church in Michigan, is a story of keeping the faith in spite of racial division in the region, with initiatives like its community garden and vacation Bible school. St. John's looks forward to hosting General Assembly volunteers from all over southeast Michigan for fellowship events such as picnics and concerts.

For Fort Street Presbyterian Church—located just blocks from Cobo Center, the home for the 221st General Assembly (2014)—diversity is a hallmark. Integrated since the 1960s, its membership is racially, ethnically, educationally, economically, theologically, and politically diverse—and is LGBTQ inclusive. Fort Street draws members from both the city and the suburbs, some commuting quite a distance for its diversity and outreach to the city of Detroit. But as pastor Sharon Mook points out, it hasn't always been easy.

Fort Street's 40-year-old Open Door project, supported by volunteers and contributions from congregations all over the metro area, offers showers, clothing, haircuts, and basic medical care to people who are homeless, serving 400 meals each week. A social worker provides counseling, and job openings are posted in the common area. Fort Street partners with St. John's for fellowship and outreach.

Visitors coming to the 221st General Assembly (2014) may notice the new slate roof on this beautiful Gothic Revival church listed on the National Register of Historic Places. That's not spit and polish. It's a result of a massive fundraising effort that pays tribute to Fort Street's belief that there is hope in Detroit—a symbol of its commitment to being part of Detroit's revitalization.

This crisis is an opportunity

Each congregation's story of diversity is told against the backdrop of the City of Detroit's bankruptcy. But that bankruptcy declaration is not simply a confirmation of a bleak landscape. It is also an opportunity to turn a page.

As city government struggles to provide basic services, new leadership is emerging. Faith-based organizations are rising to the occasion, and Presbyterians are part of that effort. Urban congregations are finding new ways to serve their neighbors. Suburban churches, with their many members who grew up in Detroit, are forming partnerships with city congregations and agencies. As more and more Presbyterians move out of the pews and into the streets, more will get to know each other as individuals committed to serving God and ministering to the needs of the city and southeast Michigan. Hope abounds.

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The 221st General Assembly (2014) is in Detroit—it matters!

Not everyone is thrilled that General Assembly will be held in Detroit this summer. They wonder, “Why bring 3,000 people to ground zero of the urban crisis in America?”

Here in the Detroit metro area, we are excited about the opportunity to host Presbyterians from across the nation and world. No doubt, the influx of 3,000 commissioners and others will bring an economic boost to a suffering city. But we’re also excited about what commissioners will see in Detroit. They won’t only observe many of Detroit’s problems. They’ll see hope amid the hopelessness. They’ll find stories of grace and faith that stand in contrast to the bleakness on the news. In addition to great need, they’ll see the willingness, energy, creativity, and commitment to serve that need. They’ll meet Detroiters proud to welcome them to their city and abounding in hope.

To watch the film *Abound in Hope*, produced by Richard Jewell and shown at the end of the 220th General Assembly (2012) as a witness to Presbyterian ministry in Detroit: youtube.com (search for “Abound in Hope 2014”)

To learn more about the coming General Assembly: oga.pcusa.org/ga221

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