

The former Everett United Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee was reborn as a community of shalom.

A Zone for Shalom

Grassroots movements of church and community leaders aim to put the neighborhood "PARISH" back in the church.

BY MICHAEL J. CHRISTENSEN

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. —Isaiah 61:4

A SPIRIT OF INNOVATION IS BLOWING IN THE wind, creating new opportunities for church redevelopment and fresh expressions of *ecclesia* in particular neighborhoods. Either a new notion of church is being born or we're returning to the original idea of the neighborhood *parish* and the common life of the primitive church. But either way, these place-based models of community ministry help Christians who live, work or worship in particular neighborhoods to "seek the shalom of the community to which you have

been sent ..." (Jeremiah 29:7). They invite us to innovative models of ministry, to rebuild or repurpose historic church buildings for the common good, and to identify more sustainable models of worship and mission in the "new parish."

"Parish" is an old concept of neighborhood-based pastoral care and community ministry. According to Paul

Sparks, the "new parish" refers to all the relationships (including the land) where the local church lives out its faith together. "By crafting a life together in a definable place, the parish becomes a platform for a whole new way of being the church..."¹

One new expression of *ecclesia* is Communities of Shalom—a grassroots,

faith-inspired, community development network of geographically defined expression of God's shalom initiated by the United Methodist Church (sometimes called "Shalom Zones"). A Shalom Zone is a demonstration act or gathering place, like a community garden or urban park, which points to the gift of health, wholeness and shared prosperity of God's shalom.

The first Shalom Zone was initiated by the United Methodist Church in 1992 during the social uprising in Los Angeles following the not-guilty verdict for the policemen who used excessive force in beating motorist Rodney King. The idea of creating empowerment zones of safety and shalom in small geographical areas, sometimes just one square block, caught on and spread to other areas of the country. Today, there are more than 150 Shalom Zones where God's people "seek the shalom of the community"

where they live, work or worship.

One Shalom Zone is the Christ Ministry Center in San Diego, California. According to former pastor and current executive director Bill Jenkins, Christ United Methodist Church had dwindled from 700 to less than 40 members. The denomination decided not to sell the building but allow the local church to be formally decommissioned as a local congregation so that they could reopen as a ministry center. "This Church is Not For Sale" became a rallying cry to attract and connect other small congregations, community ministries and strategic partners to share the ministry use of the 25,000-square-foot building. Today, Christ Ministry Center is a vibrant, creative and effective ministry center in an ethnically diverse and transitional neighborhood. A dozen multiethnic congregations of various faiths share worship space in the sanctuary, and empty Sunday school rooms unused for decades were spruced up to house community ministries. "We open our doors at 6:30 a.m. and close them at 9:30 p.m.," says Bill Jenkins. "We touch over 1,200 lives every week, offering 'abundant help' for spiritual and physical necessities. And we're completely self-sustaining."

Another thriving example of this model of Shalom is in the Binghampton area of Memphis, Tennessee. When it no longer made sense for a dwindling congregation to remain open, the congregation agreed to give their church building to a nonprofit ministry. The board of directors hired Amy Moritz as executive director to raise funds and convert the church to a ministry hub in the neighborhood. Institutionally, the three-story brick building with stained-

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glass windows and a cross is no longer a church, but missionally, it's a new and bold expression of *ecclesia*. The former

Amy says, "What happens when a repurposed church building finds its new life in the shared identity of the community? Legal services are provided for undocumented immigrants. Children and adult refugees fleeing their war-torn countries receive tutoring, learn better English, and gain new life skills. Advocates work for an equitable and just local food system that emphasizes access, affordability and environmental sustainability. And, people worship, pray, and discern the call God has placed on them to seek peace with justice. All of this and more happens through the community of nonprofits, congregations and programs that, through their shared life in the building, have re-visioned it as a sacred space for sharing the love of Christ, re-visioned it as Shalom Church."

Within the next 10 years, as 4,000 churches a year continue to close, fewer than half of those who follow Jesus will follow him into a traditional church building. To save the church, the time has come to "be the church for others" by converting church buildings and repurposing church properties for the common good.

SHALOM MINISTRY is marked by six threads represented by the six letters of the word "Shalom." To seek shalom means to work for:

- S** Systemic change
- H** Health, healing, harmony and wholeness
- A** Asset-based community development (ABCD)
- L** Love for God, neighbor, self and other
- O** Organizing for action
- M** Multicultural, multifaith cooperation

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1. Sparks, Paul, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen. *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* by (2014).

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