

DUPC Sunday Forums

January 2025

Sunday, January 5th

No Sunday Forum

Sunday, January 12th

**An Introduction to
the Reverend Carson Mouser**

Bob Richane and David Lee

Rev. Mouser will be working with our congregation
to discern who we are now in 2025.

What makes us unique and what is God calling us to do?

Sunday, January 19th

No Sunday Forum Planned

Rev. Carson Mouser to lead Worship

Sunday, January 26th

My Spiritual Journey

Bob Richane

Sundays, 9:45 AM ~ The Shaw Room

***Preparing for
Rev. Carson Mouser***

DUPC Sunday Forum
January 19, 2025

David Lee & Bob Richane

Good morning.

Today Bob Richane and I in this presentation will try to begin to prepare ourselves (that is DUPC) for the upcoming presentations by Rev. Carson Mouser. His presentations themselves are also a preparation for a process, a process that examines our past and present in order to prepare for our future. That future is of course very unclear. And today we begin again.

Uncertainty is one of the big reasons for anxieties that we bring to this process. We won't delve into the emotional and spiritual issues that underlie our anxieties surrounding Uncertainty. But we should acknowledge them. We live in uncertain times, and that raises up many "negative emotions": we are nervous, anxious, fearful; perhaps defensive, even angry; perhaps avoidant and depressed. We try to call on coping mechanisms that used to work.

We are, after all, living in interesting times, aren't we? They are interesting and troubling, and it all relates to a loss of Order. We see it in our institutions and public lives: in our sources of information, in our leaders, our economics, our communities, our government; in our religious practices, in this church's decline in numbers and cohesion. We see it in our private lives: in our ailments and illnesses, in the losses of so many beautiful people and beautiful relationships. Everywhere there is loss of Order. And we see threats of more Disorder in our futures.

So, let us pray.

Dear God, we can remind ourselves to thank you first. Whatever we must let go of, remind us to thank it, thank them for the time we had with them. Thank you for the gifts we have received, and the world of wonder you surround us with. Thank you.

Please open our eyes to that wonder, and the gift that we can wonder. There is a Piece of God in all we encounter – certainly in people and other living things; but also in the things we humans have created – there is a Piece of God, always a particle of God. Help us to see that there is also a Peace of God (that still, quiet voice) within ourselves that the world cannot give, and which it cannot take away – we contain an unwounded, factory-installed Peace of God.

As we wrestle with our pasts and confront the uncertainties of our future, dear God, remind us that we are not alone in these uncertainties. We share this anxiety with others facing Disorder – so many others. Things are always changing, though we always wish the good things won't. Oh well: we are reminded that Change is always with us. The ways of the world are always changing.

We hope that something will abide: something to remain, stay, continue, and dwell with us. We are reminded that it is not Things that abide, but Intangibles: Faith, Hope and Love. Thank you for that, too.

Amen.

Outline

- Recall where we have been recently ...
 - Transition Team (T-team)
 - Losses (Pat, members, staff, leadership, morale, direction, identity ...)
 - Jubilee -- celebrating the history
 - Sunday Forums (Dorhauer, groups sharing space, Christian Nationalism)
- Where might we be going?
 - Recent letters to Session, noting challenges in
 - Membership
 - Endowment
 - Building
 - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT)
 - Discernment
- Rev. Carson Mouser ...
 - Background
 - Methods
 - Where and Who are "We"?

Over the past many months, DUPC has tried to address the uncertainties in order to move beyond Uncertainty toward something like Mission or Purpose.

Today, we want to introduce Rev. Carson Mouser. (He says it will be all right to call him "Carson" when he is in his role as a facilitator.) But there is preparatory work to be done. And with Session we discussed how much we needed to recall the recent past. There is a risk in looking back, isn't there?: that there would be reminders of things we'd almost forgotten or repressed; that we recall disappointments, and become cynical about change ; that we recall losses that relate to institutions and systems and people that we believe are still too rigid. (As an undergraduate, I was fortunate enough to hear an upperclassman say that cynicism is often the reaction to a romantic perspective. To avoid the disappointment that leads to cynicism, it is possible to guard against romantic ideas.)

So there is a line of thinking that suggests that we should keep that history as subliminal as possible. It's there of course, but maybe we should attach our hopes to the Here and Now, to what Carson Mouser can offer, to focus on beginning again.

We (Session, Rev. Phil, Bob and myself) are willing to believe that a look back would be more help than harm. So we are here to recall somewhat where we have been recently.

But, let's try to keep the recollection to facts mostly. Let's remember the findings and facts. Let's also try to reframe whatever anger and disappointment and cynicism we might have; and also reframe whatever nostalgia and pride we have. Raising up the past can give us an opportunity to reassess what meanings we created, what connections we made between experiences and feelings.

For us to move forward, we must believe that God is good, and that They can give us strength to change ourselves enough to accept change in others. Perhaps that is why the Quaker quote is so useful to me: "Live up to the light you have, and more will be given to you."

And the corollary (I always find a corollary, because I am so inclined to say, Yes – But), is that change is particularly hard when you are older and struggling with holding on, with not losing any more, sometimes with just surviving. But change also gives us a chance to continue in our paths of growth, even in our later years.

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So we will try to be brief (so far, not really)

Recall where we have been recently:

I will review what the Transition Team found 2-3 years ago. It should be a reminder only. Our church membership has declined and we have changed since then, so if we did the process again, we might find some differences from then. But I think we will see that on some things we agreed, and on a lot of things we didn't.

These similarities and differences in values and opinions are what make us unique. They are the starting place for us to discover Who We Are as a community. Those similarities and differences will contribute to defining our Identity. Defining a communal identity might be difficult in an individualistic, prideful culture such as ours: what must I compromise to belong to *This* group? We will hash this out with Rev. Mouser, and very possibly some people might answer No-way or Not-me. It's a "will you stay with this party, or not?" moment. Or we might find that it is all Good enough, and that we can all get along.

From a historical and political perspective: if we cannot find ways to work together, how can we expect Congress to, how can we expect the world to? On the other hand, the Presbyterian Church has always been one of splintering and re-grouping. God is Change. Is the Church the Body of Christ? If so, What part of the body do you see yourself as, and how do you work with the other parts of the body? Or more particularly, what part of the Church will this church act as, what part of the body are We?

We need also to acknowledge the losses we have had. Losses that are not processed as grief will tend to be retained as grievances – a useful, not very common-sense pronouncement. What losses can we let go of? What injustices need to be addressed? Who has the problem, Them or Me? This will not be a counseling session though.

We can celebrate, too. I will review some history of this church, with one caveat being that history is generally written by the winners. Human history can be storied, but as with all human creations, they are mortal. We wish, but probably can't go forward with red caps proclaiming, MDGA.

We have done some homework to understand our place in history and culture – in Sunday Forum we have addressed some of the realities that exist.

Where might we be going?

At this point I will turn to Bob Richane.

Bob will describe two letters to Session, letters that Jim Vesper and I wrote, in which we put down thoughts we had separately distilled on where we were and what might need to be changed to get out of our funk. They were letters encouraging Change and Choice.

These letters were "the easy part": they pointed out the difficulties, they offered up questions, and they did not offer solutions. They identified the crossroads, and even gave some idea of the paths leading away. But our letters did not prescribe answers. We are at a crossroads, where any choice of "way leads on to way," as in Frost's poem "The road less traveled." Frost as someone older, looking back, of course "took the one less traveled by." How nice and inspiring when we first read it in high school. I would ask, however, how is the choice made for someone in their 70s and older, when no path forward is especially "grassy and [wanting in] wear"?

There will come a time for hard-nosed analyses. SWOT analyses and all that. But as with all things in a church, there needs to be Discernment – how is the spirit of God directing, calling us? It's a bit unfamiliar to me, to trust in God rather my analytical training. But if a church will be a church (and not a corporation or a protocol), it may want to embrace with Faith and Hope that it is the best place, the sanctuary to invite God's loving Spirit to.

Rev. Carson Mouser

So with that as prelude, we will describe a little of who Carson Mouser is, and how he proposes to work with us.

When Session was debating whether another facilitator and consultant would be worthwhile, I was of the opinion that this was not the same as before. Yes, we have to begin again and re-open our hearts and minds to the past and present. But it seems that there is a difference here: Rev. Mouser steps back, way back. He does not look at Church 2.0 issues. He does not even stop at asking us to define a mission for moving forward. No, he starts by saying there is no way forward without knowing Where we Are and who we are. We have to move beyond claiming and proclaiming our individual identities. We also have decide if we can find a corporate identity.



The T-team (2021-2022)

- Members were
 - Raina Boupavong, Marie Gibson, Becky Parks, Coriander Rainbeaux, Windsor Wade
- Methods
 - 5 Focus points: Heritage, Mission, Connections, Leadership, Future
 - Cottage meetings, survey, meetings with staff, summary
 - Not finances
- Cottage meeting questions:
 - What keeps you coming, and what would make you leave?
 - When was a time you felt God at work in this congregation?
 - What would be lost to the Rochester community if Downtown Presbyterian ceased to exist?
 - What are the most important goals for congregation in the next 5 years?
 - What decisions do you think the congregation needs to make before it's ready to search for a new pastor?
- See PDF documents sent out earlier

The Transition Team's efforts in 2021 to 2022 asked DUPC pertinent questions to help “define itself”: we needed that in order to find an installed pastor.

It was a recent high point in our self-understanding. It is sad of course that Raina and Cori have chosen to leave this congregation since. That, and our failure to find someone to come to Rochester to serve with us, remind us that we are perhaps “not attractive” enough for others.

Reviewing the process, led by Laurie Tiberi: it had 5 Focus points (Heritage, Mission, Connections, Leadership, Future). It used small-group cottage meetings, surveys and larger meetings to come up with a summary.

Recall these questions we were asked to consider:

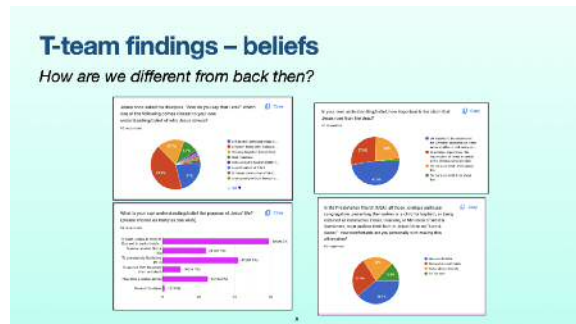
The results were sent out, and earlier this month I sent out the summary reports again.

I will only quickly review some of the points we discovered.

Two other points:

- These questions will sound somewhat familiar when we engage with Rev. Mouser. But his process does seem different. Bob and I spoke with him this week.
- Carson Mouser has reviewed those reports, too. He quickly picked up on two issues: 1 -

the differences among the 3 churches that merged in 1974 somehow remained evident.
 2 - there was evidence of mistrust, as there were calls for “transparency.”
 Not bad for a quick reading of those reports!

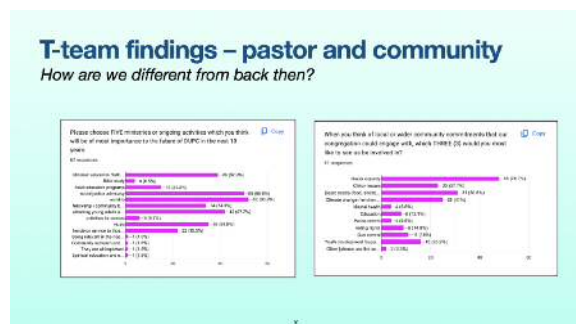


As I said, I want to move quickly through these slides. You can look for these results in your emails.

I note:

- We “sort of” maintain mainline (so-called Reformed) church beliefs about the nature of Jesus and the role of the church.
 - Only a minority are convinced of the divinity of Jesus, many more are agnostic and non-committal. Many seem uncomfortable with creeds that they grew up with, that remain to this day.
 - I wonder if Paul would label this as “lukewarm” belief!
 - Many are more comfortable with a fully human Jesus – it probably is related to the reductionist and materialistic culture we are in.

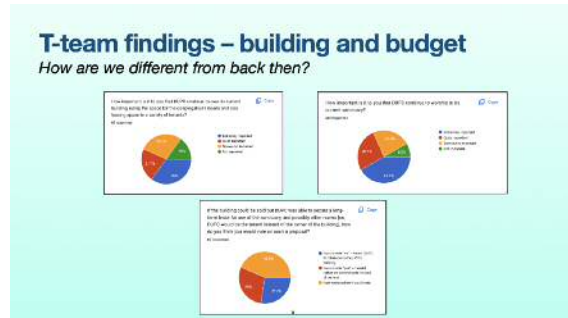
Ultimately, it matters less what our community felt a while back, which is now a whole 3 years ago. I wonder how a poll done today would turn out.



Our priorities regarding the relationships with pastor and community are graphed here.

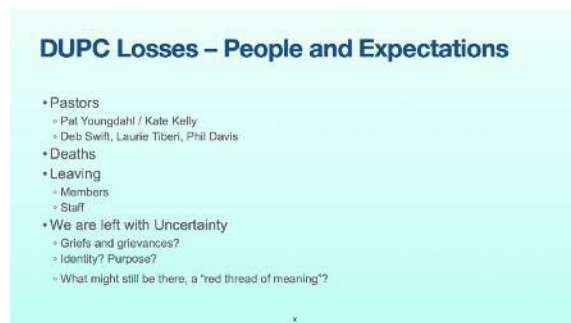
- The music is important (over half of respondents)
- But back then it was not as important as coming together for worship, advocacy, education, and a hope to bring in younger members.
 - Should I be disappointed that only a quarter considered adult education programs (Forum) important?
- And these were identified as the activism efforts that should be most important.

Do we still have these priorities?



Regarding the use of the building:

- More than half of the 60 responses in 2022 felt it important that DUPC remain the owner of these buildings.
- Two-thirds thought it important to worship in the sanctuary.
- I wonder what the responses might be now.



I don't need to belabor this point. We have suffered many losses. Losses can be mourned, and through grief, it can become a means of growth. Religions have long served this purpose: providing comforts to the losses in life, providing means to cope and develop new perspectives to accommodate the losses. Connecting individuals to something transcendent.

Cornel West would remind us that because we live in a Culture of Mass Distraction, we do not have to wrestle with these questions often or well. We don't have to face catastrophes, natural and man-made. And thus we don't face loss, uncertainty, evil. We don't have experiences that go through Tears to Silence, to Song. As the best of the Abrahamic traditions found. Our Culture of Mass Distraction insulates us, that and the privileges in our lives.

But Anger can also be a consequence of loss: It is one of the first responses to hurt and injury, and damaged expectation. Anger is one of the Three Poisons in Buddhism, something to be aware in order to let go of. I mind the hurt, I look for its source, when I feel anger.

Anger is a complicated thing, and we cannot easily let go of broken expectations, or the hurts of disrespect, disregard, dishonor and disgrace. (remember how anger is one of the motivations in the Christian nationalist and MAGA movements - the disses). Especially if we are taught not to grieve losses, it is hard to let go of the anger. Recall that the "last stage" of grief is acceptance. What if you never get to acceptance? You're left with degrees of denial, anger, depression, etc.

So we do need to acknowledge the losses of our people and our expectations. Sometimes it might even be easier to let go of people than expectations.

Let's recall and mind our losses.

In 2021 DUPC was already searching for a pastor after the debacle that followed the hiring of Kate Kelly. There remain even today questions and suspicions about that process. The subsequent experiences with interim and supply pastors have created unease for various reasons. There has recently been strain between the congregation and the Session.

We have lost many members through death. And the average age of the remaining members and congregants keeps going up. So there are impending losses to anticipate or guard against.

We have lost staff and members through leaving. And each leaving raising questions about Why and What if ... We grieve (or are angry) about lost opportunities and hopes.

And of course, we are at our crossroads, unsure of where we are, not sure how to trust God, not sure what will give courage and hope to go on (given the losses that we remember).

How are we to move through these losses?

It is a role for religion and spirituality to connect us to something outside of ourselves, connect us to something that would outlast ourselves. Because we are repeatedly reminded that our worldly relationships and expectations tend to come to an end too soon.

What is lasting? What can connect the past to the present, and then to the future?

Rev. Mouser's approach acknowledges all these challenges.

Jubilee celebrations:
"Forward from 50: Lighting the Way"

- A new church came together in 1975 ...
- 50th Anniversary Planning Committee
 - Nancy B, K McC, Becky P, Carol S, Lee W
- Sept 15 Luncheon: Merger memories and more
 - Pastors and choir
 - Session meetings and Sunday Schools
 - Lake Ave. Baptist Church fire
- Nov 10: Jubilee Celebration Luncheon
 - \$3300 donations to FPGROC, REACH, ROCmusic, Teen Empowerment

This year's celebrations reminded us ...

Jubilee -
Recalling a worthy history

- 1815, First Presbyterian established; 1825, Second/Brick; 1836, Bethel/Central
 - Central wanted to engage in "active Christianity" – beyond creeds
 - Brick Church fire in 1903
- 1903-1970: new Brick Church buildings on North Fitzhugh
- 1975 – merger to form DUPC
- 1979 – More Light church.
- 1984 – Sanctuary for a Salvadoran refugee family
- 1991 – call to Janie Spahr.
- 1991-2010 – efforts to permit ordination of LGBTQ pastors
- RAIHN (FPGROC), BMISS, Water for South Sudan, TE, EarthCare, Middle East Peace, more, ...

Before moving on to Rev. Mouser, let's remind ourselves of Downtown's worthy history. This year has been a jubilee year, something to celebrate.

Downtown's worthy history includes these highlights:

Bob and I were impressed how Carson (he will let himself be addressed that way when in his facilitator role) focuses on history. He will ask "us" (volunteers among us) to do a search of the past: a genealogy if you will.

What traditions lived in each of those churches before they merged? What has become of those traditions?

I note that Central had this history of wanting to engage in "active Christianity," something beyond reminders of creeds. .

I have heard the Brick Church traditions were more "white glove." Phil noted that there are coat hangers with donors' names on them as that was one way to preserve legacy (reminders of "indulgences"?).

So although we use the Brick Church buildings, what will we discover about the people in it?

Sunday Forums addressing "reality"

- Susan Orr
- Others in building
- Dorhauer
 - Church 2.0 vs. Church 3.0; what is your mission?
- Lea Kone
 - "Kinds of church": for Fellowship, Discipleship, Worship, Ministry, Evangelism
- Kevin Hershey – one cannot be all things
- Current external issues:
 - Postmodernism, DEIB, Christian nationalism, immigration, environment
- Spirituality in times of crisis: fellowship, identity, purpose

(review of Forums in the past year, 2024)

It starts with Identity

- Where might we be going with:
 - Endowment?
 - Building?
 - Membership?
- SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

↑

MISSION

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IDENTITY

(We face challenges about specifics such as the endowment, the building and membership.

Dorhauer reminded us that defining a Mission should precede efforts to address specifics.

Now we are reminded that defining our Identity should precede efforts to address Mission.)

Rev. Dr. Carson Mouser

Background

- Biography – “not all who wander are lost”
 - Born in California, early 1950s. Moved frequently.
 - Journalist, historian, insurance analyst, academic, Air Force veteran
 - Called later to ministry – M.Div at CRCDS, D.Min at Columbia Theological Seminary
 - Ordained in PC(USA) in 1998
- Experienced
 - “Narrative mission study process” was subject of his doctorate.
 - Addressing change requires understanding of one’s history and identity.
 - Many interim pastorates
 - Experienced with congregations becoming small, with buildings, with historical conflicts, with traumas
- He has done this before.

He feels he has a background that is suited to his current calling to help others find their way.

He believes strongly that understanding one’s history, the arc of one’s story, is crucial to defining one’s identity. (Perhaps we can recall the saying that Love is the voice of our ancestors whispering to us.)

The congregation is invited ...

- Service on January 19 – history, change and identity
- Small-group meetings (by end of February)
 - Small, in-person, Zoom, and/or hybrid; 90 minutes
 - Need volunteers to host
 - “Nine Questions” – notes to be taken on the answers
- He writes a Narrative Report of the DUPC “story” based on answers to 9Q.
 - It will comment on how 3 churches “united.”
 - He has noted mistrust underlying calls for “transparency”
- Self-education efforts by congregation: church history, “biblical narrative”
- 6- hour workshop and retreat (March 8 or March 15)
 - Videos and group exercises
 - Write congregation’s statement “Just Cause / Why We Exist”
- We invite you ...
 - Make your voice heard; experience it.

His process is a plan; the resulting story is specific to the congregation.

Engaging in this process emphasizes the congregation’s role in the church. So the congregation is being invited.

Nine questions

1. What has the church’s ministry meant to you?
2. How have your expectations for the growth and vitality of the church’s ministry been met?
3. Who or what has influenced the church’s ministry over the years?
4. What unmet expectations from the latest pastoral relationship are still present?
5. What changes to the church’s [local and global] ministry ... would you make?
6. How will pastoral leadership and congregational leadership contribute to those changes?
7. What style of leadership is needed at this point in the congregation’s life?
8. How does this congregation contribute to the global Christian church?
9. What will this local community lose if this congregation ceases to exist?

A Brief History of the Downtown United Presbyterian Church

In the early 1800's, when the village of Rochesterville had but 300 inhabitants, a need was felt for a religious presence in the growing community, and on May 1, 1815 the First Presbyterian Church was established, the earliest of the predecessor churches of the Downtown United Presbyterian Church.

By 1825 a group of First Presbyterian Church members concluded that a new church was needed. The Second Presbyterian Church in Rochester, eventually to become The Brick Presbyterian Church was organized in November of that year with 25 members.

In 1836, 39 members of First Presbyterian Church, including many of its leaders, founded the Bethel Presbyterian Church, later to be called the Washington Street Church, and, ultimately, Central Presbyterian Church. The founding of the Bethel Church (Central Church) was based on a desire to engage in an "active Christianity", going beyond pious creeds and directly addressing the major issues of the day. Many of its members were abolitionists; six had "safe houses" on the Underground Railroad.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, the three Presbyterian churches, along with St. Luke's Episcopal Church, met to consider their mutual future. Well before the 1974 merger of the First, Brick, and Central Presbyterian Churches became Downtown United Presbyterian Church, the churches established Action of Church and Community Together. ACCT reflected the priority the churches placed on service to the community.

In 1984, the Downtown Church became a Sanctuary church for refugees fleeing the civil war in El Salvador, providing living space in the Institute Building for three generations of a refugee family.

In 1979, we became one of the first More Light churches in the country. As openly gay and lesbian friends joined the church, we experienced marvelous spiritual growth of mutual understanding and respect. In 1991 our Call to Rev. Dr. Jane Adams Spahr, an open lesbian, was denied by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission of the PCUSA. Our response was the establishment of That All May Freely Serve (TAMFS), to work to change the Presbyterian Church. In 2010 the constitution of the Presbyterian Church was changed, permitting the ordination of qualified LGBT people.

Over these two hundred years our forebears and we have sought to be open to the voice of the Holy Spirit calling us into reflection and action. We rejoice in our current involvement with programs of Racial Justice, Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network, Sanctuary Village, Building Minds in South Sudan, Water For South Sudan, Tutoring at School 3 and East High School, Educational Equality in City Schools, Middle East Peace, Earth Care, Community Food Cupboard, and others.

We are thankful as well that our congregation is blessed by vibrant ministries of worship, music, caring, and education for all ages.

We believe that the Spirit has more for us to do and we are ready.

December 14, 2024

Dear Session:

I informed Bob Richane recently that I will not be continuing on Session after my current tenure ends on January 1, 2025. I have great ambivalence about doing so, as there is much work that I might be able to help with. Many personal and community efforts need attention, and (as you can understand) I am in a time of life where it makes the best sense to concentrate my remaining energy and attention on doing a few things better, rather than to spread myself too thinly.

I don't mind continuing as chair of the Sunday Forum Committee for the first half of 2025. Please keep me informed of any scheduling and content issues that the SFC needs to be aware of, as I will be "out of the loop."

In the three years of my tenure, it has become more and more evident to me that we are fading as a congregation, with the main problem being our dwindling numbers more than our dwindling financial situation. I have fantasized, What if ... what if I won a lottery? I could see donating some of that largesse to DUPC, but it would not solve our problems, would it? Even hiring consultants and/or staff, it would not solve the main problem, which is that there are fewer and fewer able bodies and willing minds to carry out a mission.

I am encouraged that the process we plan to begin with Carson Mouser might provide a methodology to "define ourselves." I certainly hope that all of DUPC will engage in that earnestly and wholeheartedly: the remaining congregants need to feel free to express their hopes and disappointments. Defining an identity and a mission, of course, will be hard enough. But, whatever the outcome, who could do the work of carrying out the daily and weekly tasks of keeping a church going?

I believe that we must recognize that there are two parts to "Us": a fellowship part and a managing part. The fellowship part of DUPC has scars and happy memories ... and fewer members every year. It gathers with high hopes each week to join in Lee Wright's music ministry, to hear God touch our hearts and minds, and to connect with those whom we have known for years and longer. If we eventually come to acknowledge that we have passed below a critical mass in membership, it would also be acknowledging that we will be losing the company, experience and wisdom of each other. Is that the "real DUPC"? What mission could that group still impart to each other and the Rochester community? Part of the endowment could be used to sustain the worship and fellowship efforts of this group to enjoy and (oh please God) even grow.

But the other part, the managing part, also needs to be addressed – the part that needs abler hands and more bodies. The job of running a large, old building is a big job, even with the able work of Eileen and others. Lea Kone in her 3/17/2024 Sunday Forum presentation mentioned (among many good ideas) the idea of forming an independent nonprofit organization to own the

building and manage its functions (51:00). The organization would of course need to define its mission, membership and resources, but it would take over the management functions from the congregation. Part of the endowment could be used as seed money for such an organization.

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It is a platitude to say that Downtown faces many challenges. As we invest in efforts to define an "identity" and then a "mission," it will be necessary to accept our limitations. Part of that acceptance will require mourning what was once but no longer is possible, due to losses in membership and due to wounded expectations. Part of that will require acceptance of our changing and disparate priorities.

A small church can not do everything, but it can still be part of a larger body of Church.

Sincerely and hopefully,

David Lee

Fade-out, Flame-out, or Flourish?

(revised 2 April 2024)

Downtown United Presbyterian Church (DUPC) in Rochester, New York is in an existential crisis. We see this in the declining number of congregants on Sunday mornings, the steady drawdown on the endowment, an aging congregational demographic, and the challenge of finding members or friends to serve on committees. In the past ten years, we have experienced situations that have caused hurt and resulted in scars and distrust.

DUPC and the three Presbyterian churches that came together in 1974 to form DUPC have had a significant influence locally and in the PCUSA denomination from introducing a co-pastor model to challenging – and changing – the PCUSA's stance on LGBTQ+ clergy. That is a legacy we cannot forget but we need to move on.

So what happens now? Do we quietly fade out as our endowment and congregation decline? Do we try a dramatic “Hail Mary” attempt to do something very different even though it might be a spectacular failure? Do we look for ways that DUPC can find a new path by creatively using the resources that we have?

This paper is one Session member's thinking through three potential outcomes that are organized in terms of “fade-out”, “flame-out” or “flourish” in which there may be several pathways to those endpoints. It is meant to spur a lively discussion among those – Session members and the congregation – that have a heart and passion for the special place we call Downtown Church.

One thing must be stated up front: If we do not make a conscious decision to change paths, we will remain on the path that we are on which is a passive fade-out. Not making a decision *is* a decision. Time is not our friend here.

Fade-out

The plane we are on is running low on fuel. Despite pledges and plate offerings that have stabilized in the past several years and the income from an increased number of tenants, we are withdrawing a significant amount from the endowment. Without any new major contributions (generally from bequests of those members and friends who have passed on), the forecast is the endowment (around \$5.5 million on Feb 29, 2024) will be depleted in 10 -11 years. (The rule of thumb on withdrawals is four percent a year in order to sustain the principle; we have been annually withdrawing 8-10 percent in most of the past decade.) This Timeframe could be significantly shorter (5-8 years?) if Spiritus Christi is successful in finding a new church home and is no longer DUPC's most significant tenant in terms of rental income.

As our church infrastructure ages, projects move from the “nice to do” to the “need to do” column that puts further demands on the endowment.

The endowment issue is not new. It has been discussed for many years. It has been the fuel that has kept the plane afloat but it isn't going to last much longer.

If we don't take significant steps, DUPC will simply fade away. The result will be one more main-line, big steeple church that has disappeared.

Flame-out

“Go big or go home” is an expression that encapsulates this outcome. It is trying something very different that is truly radical using up the endowment far more rapidly. It could mean doing a major renovation of part of the church property – Celebration Hall? – in hopes that it will become much more of an income generating space. It might be hiring additional professional staff with the desire that they could attract new friends and members similar to what we were considering with the “Downtown Center”. Or, we might find an opportunity that allows us to create or support something that would have a lasting legacy. This option is only limited by our imagination and a lot of courage.

This outcome contains significant risks including raising questions about our fiduciary responsibility to the endowment and the Presbytery.

Flourish

This outcome demands out-of-the-box thinking (as does “flame-out”) but is done in a much more thoughtful, risk-controlled way. It is intended to place DUPC on a path that is quite different from the one we are on but enables us to be a place where, according to a past mission statement, *“We seek the nourishment of spiritual adventure as we explore the questions of our day...”*

Pathways to this outcome could include merging with another (Presbyterian?) congregation or removing the biggest albatross – our building. It could also mean re-examining the “Downtown [Spiritual] Center” concept from a few years ago.

While the DUPC complex – the sanctuary, Taylor chapel, and the Institute and Allen Street buildings may have been ideal for the merged churches 50 years ago, we are not “right-sized” with our current congregation. You can see this in the empty balcony and the pews with only several people sitting in them. Costs to maintain the facilities (at least \$400,000 depending on how staffing is allocated) account for approximately one-half of our budget and are basically paid for by withdrawals from the endowment.

What if we freed ourselves from this?

Here’s one idea: We know that Spiritus Christi is still looking for a building. They approached DUPC last year but we declined to entertain the idea because of their aggressive timeline and that we were in the search for a new fulltime pastor. We also felt that we would have no control over our future – whether it meant being renters or our finding another church home. We now find ourselves in a different place as we move to having a stated supply pastor.

Perhaps we can revisit the idea of a sale to Spiritus. Maybe we can all be very creative in how the space is shared and in any financial arrangements.

Conclusion

We at DUPC still have a small amount of time to decide on the outcome (those presented here or ones that others may identify) and the pathway to get there. We need to have the difficult conversations about the church home that has meant so much to us and what it can mean for others in the coming years. Perhaps a new stated supply minister can guide us through, perhaps not. But we cannot wait for someone to join us who may or may not have the answer to what we have been living with for many years. As it says in Philippians:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you...”