



HEARTLAND CONFERENCE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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Re-imagining ministry is a very contemporary topic as we ponder the future of our churches and The Church. Some of our members have begun great efforts in this area, and we hope to share stories of these ventures in the future.


I want to take this opportunity to share how the church that I attended as a youth in Canton, Ohio has re-imagined its ministry and created stability for its future.

Long affiliated with the UCC and the previous denominations which formed the UCC in 1958, First Church served evangelical worshippers since the founding of Canton in the early 1800s. Created to serve the German immigrants who settled in the area, the church's status in the community paralleled the city's growth over the next century. The original sanctuary, today a national landmark, was constructed before the Civil War. As membership topped the 1,000-mark, a doubling of the sanctuary occurred at the turn of the 20th century and shortly thereafter was the construction of a connecting educational wing, complete with a fellowship hall/banquet facility, auditorium/gym and ample classrooms.

During the boom in church growth, membership surpassed 1,000. Then, paralleling trends in church participation, membership fell substantially during the last 50 years. Many areas of the vast building, no longer used, were shuttered off to conserve maintenance and utilities. The dwindling membership was faced the challenge of maintaining a structure it minimally used and could no longer support without delving into its endowment.

The people of First Church made a series of important decisions regarding the future direction.

- Though the neighborhood surrounding the church was long gone, the members voted overwhelmingly to stay at the east side of Canton downtown location instead of relocating, feeling that God had additional plans for the church's life in this place.
- Demonstrating its generosity and commitment to the community, the church then gifted several acres of adjoining property to an organization to create a men's shelter and occupational training center.
- In perhaps the most difficult decision, the congregation voted to cede the building property to RiverTree Christian Church for the founding of a community development and leadership center. The move allowed RiverTree to create the One Center for Leadership, which trains and supports its series of campus churches in the area. The One Center uses just about every inch of space in the vast complex for its ministry and that of its 40-some partners, such as an association to stop human trafficking. The building can also host other community events.



In exchange, RiverTree agreed to allow First Church to continue to use the building for worship and related activities, free of all financial responsibilities. Though minor alterations were made to the sanctuary, it remains very much like it did for First Church.

First Church no longer has any responsibility for upkeep and maintenance expenses of the building that it continues to us. This enabled First Church to continue its long history of faithful expression at the historic site, while using its resources to support its many missions and outreach programs.

The arrangement provides opportunities for additional community engagement and networking with other faith-based organizations. The building that the church constructed and supported for so many years continues to impact the community in many ways, and the legacy of the congregation's faithful giving continues.

This is one example of how a church re-imagined its ministry in a manner that provides for both its immediate future and a long-term continuation of its historic contributions. We hope to share more stories like this in the time ahead.

Tom Hathaway
Moderator, Heartland Conference