

Fred Smith

The POWER of Partnerships

At the turn of the new millennium my wife and I left Atlanta, Georgia, and made our way to Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

Situated on the eastern bank of the Ohio River, this town of approximately 8,100 citizens experienced the climax of its economic growth in the early to middle 20th Century as the local steel mills sustained the community. As a majority of the steel has been extracted from the area, the aging town seems to suffer from not only a lack of economic resources, but also a lack of identity and, worst of all, a loss of hope.

This small town has an urban-like setting, with a median age of 41.2 and well over half of its housing structures built in 1939 or before. Ambridge is in need of repair—and so are the lives of the people. There are many families right now in Ambridge subsisting below the poverty line. Some are suffering through financial difficulties. Others are growing up in a seemingly desolate environment both economically and spiritually. Drug abuse is rampant, the teen pregnancy rate is one of the highest in the country and homicide is the leading cause of death for the young men in the community. Still others lack the skills or knowledge needed to secure a stable future.

In this setting, Fellowship United Methodist Church was established as a “Black Mission Church” in the predominantly white United Methodist denomination, to meet the spiritual needs of African Americans moving into Ambridge. Fellowship is located one block off the main street in what was formerly the Edward McCabe Funeral Home. It was purchased in the spring of 1991 and has housed worship services and congregational activities since.

Surviving initial objections

from the residential community in which it exists, the church began community programs and met success with its youth programming. Attempts to establish a more comprehensive “mission outreach” were stifled by community members who were not supportive of the presence of “undesirable persons” in the community, namely the children of the poor. The church continued to focus on its youth programs and other mission programs, realizing that possible objections from community members might arise.

When we arrived in Ambridge, my wife Emma and I found a small church of 35 to 40 members made up primarily of poor youth and children whose parents do not attend. Fellowship United Methodist Church had lost a significant portion of its membership and the church property was decaying and deteriorating rapidly. It is a poverty stricken African American congregation in a working class white neighborhood in transition. The church has a history of struggles with racism in the form of unfair building codes that limited use of its already limited facilities

and violence at the hands of its neighbors. The collection each Sunday was less than forty dollars. After ten years, the church’s budget is still supported largely by the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference as a mission church. If any United Methodist congregation has community with children and the impoverished it is Fellowship UMC. Yet, what I quickly learned was that Fellowship serves as the staging area for work of the Western Pennsylvania Annual Conference (WPAC) on The Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty.

UM Partners

The congregation has devoted much of their energy to serving and evangelizing the youth of the community who are for the most part unchurched. In addition to Sunday morning services and week night Bible study, the church also offers a tutoring program. Children are transported to the church for an hour of tutoring and a meal paid for by First United Methodist Church of Baden. Between 20 and 25 preschool to high school aged students attend these tutoring sessions directed by church members. However, the tutors are members of several United Methodist churches in the Butler District of WPAC. A church member, whose salary is supported by the WPAC mission fund, drives the church van, which was bought with the assistance of the WPAC.

On Saturdays there is Youth Leadership training. This program offers area youths an opportunity to enjoy recreational activities (bowling, skating, visiting Steeler training camp, etc.) as well as studying the Bible together. Lunch is provided for the 5 to 15 participating youth by the United Methodist Women from Aliquippa First UMC.

Fellowship United Methodist Church

ministers to the community in a wide variety of ways. In addition to those described in the article, the congregation:

- holds services each month and during the Christmas season at area nursing facilities
- works collaboratively with the local Salvation Army distributing food and clothing during the holiday season
- works with First United Methodist Church of Ambridge to sustain the Caring Center which distributes food and clothing to area needy
- hosts WIC, the nutrition program for women, infants, and children in Pennsylvania, twice a month

Fellowship UMC provides an excellent example of how an Annual Conference, predominantly white and affluent, can establish community with children and the impoverished through cooperative ministries and funding of frontline churches.

In Matthew 25:31-40, we see Jesus promoting a ministry to the least of these brothers (and sisters). Fellowship has provided the conduit by which many churches far removed geographically from the least of these could come and touch the children and provide resources so that struggling congregations could continue to gather with the little sheep.

Fellowship United Methodist Church has been reaching out to children in the Ambridge community for the past 10 years, but with limited personnel, resources and facilities. Lack of a focused vision and inconsistent leadership has stunted the church's growth in the mission and outreach ministries.

Our task was to provide that vision and leadership. The first decision Emma and I made was to live in the community. We had an opportunity to buy a new house near the seminary where I teach, but we felt it necessary to live among those whom we would serve. Next, Emma applied for and was accepted as a 10/10/10 missionary, so that she could dedicate herself full time to providing leadership to the outreach ministries. The process of applying for the placement also forced the church to focus its vision for mission.

Ecumenical Partners

We decided to begin to work ecumenically and soon developed a partnership with any congregation in the community that shared our vision. Today we are in partnerships with Baptist, Methodist, non-denominational, Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. We share facilities, volunteers, and resources and plan common strategies. This has greatly multiplied each church's effectiveness. We are in the process of moving from the funeral home into an abandoned Catholic church that has a gym, elementary school, convent and large sanctuary

that will serve as an ecumenical family resource center. It will house all of our ministries (including Mothers of Preschoolers, G.E.D. tutoring, family literacy, transitional housing, career training, parish nursing, and abstinence education) as well as government and community-based nonprofits in one convenient location.

Local, state, and federal programs to assist these children and families are in place but cannot completely fulfill the needs of the community. Children in the Ambridge community need financial assistance, but they must also enjoy the tools of hope and empowerment. Educational programs, spiritual guidance, cultural experiences, job training are all programs that may help rebuild the faltering economy and the hope for a better tomorrow.

Our goal is to become a **Shalom Zone**. The Communities of Shalom Initiative seeks to empower congregations, community leaders and residents to address four programmatic goal areas: 1) Develop the community economically through job creation, job training and placement, business development, and affordable housing; 2) Coordinate community resources, particularly in the area of health care emphasizing prevention; 3) Develop better relationships among people of different races and or classes; and 4) Proclaim the Gospel through means that effectively change and develop the congregation and the community. Shalom for the city (a safe, clean environment, affordable housing, available health care and improved education) will ultimately lead to *shalom* for the poor children of the community and their families. □



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Ambridge is in need of repair—and so are the lives of the people.

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