

Established Church Engages Emergent Church Conversation

BUILDING a NEW FRONT PORCH



Susan Cox-Johnson

On a Saturday night in April 2004, I walked with my thirteen-year-old son through Westport, an old Kansas City neighborhood now inhabited by vintage clothing stores, art galleries, and a few independently owned coffeehouses. Older teens and “twenty-somethings” strolled the street, many with pink or jet black hair and body piercings. My son had a turquoise Mohawk and was wearing a Ramones T-shirt and Chuck Taylors.

As I looked at these younger adults, my heart ached. The next morning, very few would attend the Broadway United Methodist Church I served, just a few miles to the south. I knew God calls the church to open its mind, heart, and doors to these urban, hip children of God. I knew the old, old story needed to be told in some young, hip ways. I also knew this young generation would not enjoy the same style of worship their boomer parents do. I was not sure what that emerging approach to “doing church” was. But I knew I was called to learn for the sake of these beautiful, hip young adults, and for the sake of my own children.

The next morning, I opened the Sunday Magazine to an article about Timothy Keel and the “emergent conversation.”

The paper pictured Tim with a Bible in his hand preaching to hundreds of “twenty-somethings.” His Westport congregation, called “Jacob’s Well,” meets in an old Presbyterian church building, with a sanctuary not unlike Broadway’s. This congregation was “doing church” in new and old ways at the same time—new, because it reached so many young adults, but old, because its worship draws on classical elements of the liturgical calendar, hymnody, and iconography.

I knew Broadway could learn from this church how we, too, could be young again. I shared the article with some Broadway Church leaders and we visited a service at Jacob’s Well. We were astonished not only by the number of persons in their late teens and early twenties, but also by the energy they generated and by the hopeful spirit generated in us.

For several years, Broadway Church had worked to discern a new direction. Located in the Waldo neighborhood of south Kansas City, it once had the largest membership in the former Missouri West Conference. Part of the discernment process was remembering our history. We

recalled how in 1907 a group of mothers formed a children’s Sunday school in a blacksmith’s shop near the church. We remembered how in 1926, three hundred church members

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sacrificed to build a sanctuary large enough to accommodate those not yet part of the congregation. We also remembered the large “Keystone Sunday School Class” that met in the original chapel until disbanding in the 1990s. We also focused on our Wesleyan heritage. While studying Lovett Weems’s book, *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Abingdon, 1999), we heard a call to grow in “holiness of heart” and to be more intentional in practicing the means of grace. We learned about other churches’ rejuvenation efforts and embraced the need for a new vision statement.

It was against this backdrop of memory, prayer, and learning that we began to explore the emergent movement. We discussed Brian McLaren’s books, *More Ready Than You Realize* and *The Church on the Other Side*. I preached about today’s generational and cultural differences. We began to think about ways God is already using culture—even pop culture—to redeem God’s people.

I made a list of persons in their twenties who I believed were “on the edges of faith”—a teacher at my children’s school, the grandson of a retired pastor, a young father with children in our preschool, young couples who had been married in our church, and others. I prayed daily for them. And in the fall of 2004, we began a new small group ministry led by a younger member of our church.

Continuing to admire Jacob’s Well, we began to contemplate a “new thing”—a coffeehouse ministry. For many younger adults today, the coffeehouse is the venue for building relationships. Job interviews are conducted at Starbucks; blind dates meet up at Einstein Brothers; Bible studies, book clubs, and knitting groups meet at Borders or Barnes and Noble cafes. Coffeehouses are the new front porches of many communities.

A coffeehouse task force considered why God was calling our church to this ministry. Images such as “a front porch for Waldo” and “a gathering place for community to happen” were used to describe the vision. This “new thing” that

God was calling forth was really an embodiment of the original vision of the church—a place to gather to form community, to offer fellowship and to be used in emerging ways to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How will God use this venture? I believe God has already used it to help Broadway Church face the reality of its current place and time with creativity and open hearts.

Recalling once again our history, we remember how the Keystone Sunday School Class had revamped Broadway’s original sanctuary as a room for learning and fellowship. This old room, with its gorgeous wood floors and original stained glass windows, now stood virtually empty. We gave the name “Keystone Room Renaissance” to the new project and sent out a congregational flyer

to build excitement and raise funds. Startup efforts are still underway today.

How will God use this venture? I believe God has already used it to help Broadway Church face the reality of its current place and time with creativity and open hearts. Will the coffeehouse plans work out as the church hopes? Undoubtedly, there will be obstacles and setbacks. But I am proud of Broadway’s people who are learning from our younger generations what it means to be open to the ways God is at work in the world.

Broadway’s ministry is emerging in some ways very differently from Jacob’s Well. But Broadway has learned that to offer Christ to the younger generations, we do not need to become something we are not. Rather, we need to reclaim the same spirit of the mothers who gathered their children at the blacksmith’s shop to provide a place to build community and to encounter the love of Christ.



Susan Cox-Johnson served Broadway United Methodist Church from September 2000 to June 2005. She is now superintendent of the Heartland North District of the Missouri Conference.

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“ministers with”
or
“servants of”
the
congregation?**

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but Friends**




A Theology of Ordained Ministry
Edward C. Zaragoza

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