

Vital Churches

By: Gary Roberts, Conference Associate for Church Development and Renewal

I learned long ago that the best way to actually be a church-development expert was to know people who had found a successful strategy that others might be able to use. In other words, I think the best way to answer someone's church-development question is to introduce them to someone with actual experience grappling with their specific problem. In that spirit, I've decided to devote as many future church-development columns as possible to the story of individual SCNC churches that are having some success in reaching out to their communities. The first of these is First Congregational Church in Riverside. And if you know of a similar success story, I hope you'll bring it to my attention.

Gary

Reflection on Growth at FCC Riverside

By: Rev. Jane Quandt, pastor

First Congregational Church, UCC is located in the Historic District of Downtown Riverside, a city of approximately 300,000. Founded in 1872 it was Riverside's first church and its history is closely intertwined with the history of the city. It is also a church that has a long and proud legacy of speaking out on behalf of justice in our city. And yet like so many other mainline churches it had been in steady decline for a number of years. Recently the church has been undergoing renewal, taking in **50 new members** last year, increasing its membership to 340.

There are **several factors** that seem especially important to this church's turnaround. The **first** relates to what happened around us; Downtown Riverside underwent a major renaissance in the early 1990's, one that continues today. Whereas people had been rapidly abandoning the area, suddenly they started coming downtown again and when they did they noticed the fabulous architecture of our building. In response to the downtown renewal the church also decided to spiffy herself up too. New people started walking through her doors, including young families who were seeking a more progressive voice of faith in our community.

Second, in 2002, a gay man was assaulted in the parking lot right behind our church. (He died as a result of the wounds.) Because the church had voted to be an ONA church back in 1995, we were able to be very public in our response to the kind of hate that was behind the attack. We placed a huge rainbow flag out in the front of our charge along with a large banner that said, "**Stand Up to Hate.**" Since doing that many from the LGBT community have joined our church.

Third, in 2001 I began my pastorate at the church. One of the main things which drew me to the church was the fact that it was located in Downtown Riverside. Faced with the

changing demographics of Downtown Riverside I was drawn to the possibility of being and building a beloved community among the various “classes” which now lived in Downtown Riverside. My passion for “class diversity” fit well with the people who were walking through our doors. I look at the people gathered together around the table at my Adult Ed Class and I see what for me is the very kingdom of God -- Vietnam Vet, caretaker of plants for UCR scientists, professor, an unemployed ex-con, owner of an electrical shop, marketing man, lawyer, handy-man, IT guy, retired office worker, house cleaner, water bottler, nurse, homemaker, homeless guy, librarian -- some gay, some straight -- some single some married, some young some old -- we’re all gathered together around one table. **Kingdom of God, I say!**