



Joy in the midst of pain by Eva Stimson

Permanent fund enables mission to continue after church closes

St. Stephens Presbyterian Church in North Highlands, California, has been closed for more than four years. But the church's mission continues.

By establishing a permanent fund through the Presbyterian Foundation, the congregation left a legacy of blessing that stretches from Sacramento Presbytery to people in need around the world.

Closing a church is never easy. But the knowledge that they were leaving a legacy gave members of St. Stephens "a sense of joy in the midst of a very painful decision," says Rev. Peggy Cross, who was pastor when the church shut its doors in January 2014.

"It gave them a feeling of resurrection, because it meant that their life and ministry would go on," adds Cross, who is now transitional pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in West Sacramento.

The decision to close came after many years of seeking to discern God's will amid changing circumstances. Cross says when she became pastor

in 1987, the church had about 130 members on the roll and 85 to 90 attending worship. By the time the church closed, there were about 50 members and 35 attending worship.

Church sells property and relocates to rented space

When Cross arrived, St. Stephens members had already decided to sell their building and relocate to a growing part of Sacramento. By 1991, the congregation was renting space for worship in a high school cafeteria. The move brought an influx of young families. But many of the new members drifted away because of job transfers or because they outgrew their starter homes and moved to more affluent neighborhoods.

St. Stephens members had hoped to use some of the money from the sale of their original building to buy land and build new church facilities. "But land prices skyrocketed, so all they could afford was to purchase land," Cross says.

A faithful core group kept church programs going, but

“it was a constant challenge to find locations to do them in,” Cross says. They used an old house for their office, with limited program space. They offered an after-school program in a local elementary school and vacation Bible school in homes and backyards.

Meanwhile, they continued to set up and take down furniture for worship in the school cafeteria every Sunday. “By 2013, a lot of the core people who had made the move were older,” Cross says. “They were exhausted.”

Church leaders made numerous attempts to lease better space, but none were successful.

In 2013, Skip Herbert, Institutional Services Consultant for the Presbyterian Foundation’s Project Regeneration, reached out to St. Stephens to offer assistance. Project Regeneration helps congregations and related ministries make faithful decisions about stewardship of economic and property resources.

Herbert met with the church session in August. “At that point, the consensus was that the church would close,” Herbert recalls. “They did not feel there was a strong case for reinvention or merger.”

Closing the church; continuing its mission and legacy

Herbert encouraged them to consider using proceeds from the sale of the land they had bought to establish a fund through the Presbyterian Foundation to continue their mission causes.

“Skip talked about leaving a legacy,” Cross says. “That was a key factor in helping make the decision to close. It gave them courage and a sense of peace.”

“It was like a load being taken off their shoulders,” Herbert says. “It gave them a sense that something positive could come out of their decision.”

A brainstorming session produced a long list of possible beneficiaries of the fund. The session narrowed it down to three priorities: service/hunger organizations (such as Habitat, Heifer Project); spiritual enrichment of children and youth of Sacramento Presbytery; and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

In addition to the endowment, St. Stephens gave \$10,000 to the Presbytery of Sacramento to help churches in discernment about their future. Another gift of \$30,000 went to nearby Celtic Cross Presbyterian Church, which supported St. Stephens over the years by offering its sanctuary and other rooms for weddings, funerals, and special events.

At least three-fourths of St. Stephens members are now involved in other churches. “This is the result of keeping a spiritual connection to God throughout the discernment and multi-decision process of dissolving the congregation,” Cross says.

“Our members came to the decision really believing it was in God’s hands and it was going to be O.K.”

For more information, contact:



Paul Grier
Vice President, Project Regeneration
800.843.9547
Paul.Grier@presbyterianfoundation.org