



A Second First Start



Some church congregations that once thrived in Rockford's downtown have found new life by moving to the outskirts of the city. Others have stayed put and reached out to help solve neighborhood challenges that surround them. This is a story of the latter.

By Paula Hendrickson

In 2007, four Protestant churches in downtown Rockford – Court Street Methodist, Emmanuel Episcopal, First Presbyterian and Second Congregational UCC (SecondCon) – banded together to form Jeremiah Development, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting the well-being of its downtown neighbors.

“We realized our theologies were similar, but we also knew we were four mainline churches that had lost membership,” says Sally Hoff, a longtime member and lay leader of SecondCon.

The economic downturn of 2008 hit Rockford hard, its churches included.

“We decided to reach out to First Presbyterian to see if they might want to share custodial services,” Hoff says.

These discussions changed as First Presbyterian’s senior pastor retired and was replaced by an interim pastor tasked with helping the shrinking congregation to decide the church’s fate.

The talks grew more pressing by 2009 because of a budget crisis, says lifelong First Presbyterian member Ed Conklin.

“The [First Presbyterian] congregation decided to make the very difficult decision to sell its building and federate with SecondCon because it was apparent that without substantial, and unlikely, changes in the financial picture for the church, we would be unable to continue operations beyond another four or five years,” says Conklin. “As one who grew up in the church from the very early ’30s and later became active in the committee to oversee and maintain the building and surrounding properties, selling the building was at first unthinkable, but later a hard case in reality. I was heartbroken to lose the building, but agreed it was the only viable choice.”

“We realized we had a common theology, we both had thriving music and mission programs and we both had strong commitments to the neighborhood,” says Hoff. “We also had big,



Dr. Roger Greenlaw was a longtime First Presbyterian member who was pleased when the church merged with SecondCon.

expensive-to-maintain buildings. It made sense, since we were so similar, to join together and try to do God’s work as one.”

In late 2012, Second Congregational and First Presbyterian officially merged into Second Congregational UCC/First Presbyterian Church of Rockford. “SecondFirst,” for short.

First Presbyterian sold its building to the Mendelssohn Club, and SecondCon’s senior pastor, Mike Solberg, and First Presbyterian’s interim pastor, Beth Wagner, became equal co-pastors of the blended congregation.

“We were coming in with 20 percent of the new total [membership] to their 80 percent,” says Dr. Roger Greenlaw, a longtime First Presbyterian member who migrated to SecondFirst. “We were excited and proud of the fact that we identified the need to downsize, or merge, before we lost control of our funding. When we moved here we brought funding with us.”

The Presbyterians who stayed downtown instead of joining another church elsewhere were committed to the downtown area and had multiple missions already in place.

“They really sparked a lot of energy in our congregation,” Hoff says. “We at SecondCon hadn’t been faced with the challenge of whether we wanted to stay a congregation or do something else. They had to make a choice. But they rolled up their sleeves and got right to work. That inspired the rest of us.”

Greenlaw says both sides wanted the merger to preserve and amplify the good works of the two church mission programs and Jeremiah Development.

Due to its smaller membership, First Presbyterian members were accustomed to multitasking.

“We were used to working in maybe two or three positions in the church, so to come here and have 80 percent more energy was inspiring to us as well,” Greenlaw says.



Sally Hoff was a pivotal player in the merging of Second Congregational UCC and First Presbyterian, which happened in late 2012.

“In retrospect, the merger has far exceeded my hopes and expectation,” Conklin says. “Nearly all of the members of First Pres stayed with the congregation, and many who had left have come back to the federated church. The members of SecondCon have been incredibly kind, welcoming and understanding. We’re rapidly losing the feeling of being First Pres and SecondCon people.”

Then came a hitch: SecondFirst had known that, as a transitional pastor, Wagner would only be there another six months, but they weren’t prepared for Solberg to depart as well.

“We were six months old and didn’t have a pastor,” Hoff says.

New Leadership for a New Church

A bridge pastor led SecondFirst while a committee, chaired by Hoff, began the search for a new pastor. That’s when longtime member Becky Erbe – described by many as the caretaker of the congregation – decided to enroll in Seminary.

“It seemed like there needed to be somebody who’s been here and who knew how the church worked. I felt a real call to do it,” Erbe says.

Meanwhile, the committee received 107 applications and held a few interviews. In September 2014, Hoff received a call from the Rev. Rebecca White Newgren.

“I wasn’t even looking for a job,” says White Newgren, who loved her position at Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. “I worked with a lot of seminarians in my position, so I was always seeing jobs that were open. This job came across my desk and I said, ‘Gosh! Rockford! I know where that is.’”

Born and raised in Bloomington, Ill., White Newgren had wondered if she would return to Illinois, or if her family would stay in Philadelphia. Her husband, Andy – who is also ordained – encouraged her to make the phone call.

Both White Newgren and Hoff say they felt the hand of God at work during their 45-minute call.



Becky Erbe is the head of Member Care and Neighborhood Connections at SecondFirst. She was also installed as an assistant pastor in August.

SECONDFIRST'S COMMUNITY PARTNERS



Kevin Ware with Just Breathe 815

Jeremiah Development
Haskell School
Rockford Urban Ministries
Carpenter's Place
Bridge Clinic
Just Breathe 815
KFACT
Shelter Care Ministries
Remedies
Jubilee Center - lunches
Koats for Kids
Transform Rockford
One Body Collaborative
Unity in Diversity

“I hung up the phone and started to cry,” Hoff says. “She was the right person. Then I had to convince the search committee because she didn’t even have a resume put together yet.”

In December 2014, White Newgren came to Rockford and led a service. Then, the congregation voted on whether to extend an offer.

“The church was packed and she got 100 percent of the vote,” Hoff says.

“It felt a little bit like everything was out of my control, like God was orchestrating this amazing thing,” White Newgren adds.

Moving Forward with Good Works

About two months later, White Newgren delivered her first sermon as SecondFirst’s senior pastor.

“For me to be the first pastor of the federated congregation is something new,” she says. “Most times when pastors come into established congregations, you sit back for a year or so and you learn, and you take it in, and figure out what’s going on. But this church had been together for about two years before I even got here, so they were ready to go. They really wanted me to hit the ground running.”

So she did.

“These were two fantastic churches that were already well-established in the community,” White Newgren says. “First Pres started the Koats for Kids program that’s now run by the Rockford Register Star. SecondCon built a well in Angola and gives a pair of boots to every kid at Haskell School in the wintertime. These are two really generous congregations.”

White Newgren was also impressed by the Bridge Clinic, which was started seven years ago by First Presbyterian and a group of doctors from then-Rockford Memorial Hospital, to provide health care to anyone who needs it.

“I think the Bridge Clinic – opening its doors once a week for four hours offering people health care at no cost, no questions asked – has not yet reached its full potential,” says Greenlaw, who volunteered there early on and helped get medical students involved. “But it’s established. The staffing is consistent.

1837

First Congregational Church of Rockford is founded on the east side of the river

1854

38 people establish First Presbyterian Church of Rockford on the third floor of the Porter Drug Store building on the northeast corner of Elm and Church

1891

Construction begins on SecondCon's current structure at 318 N. Church Street

Feb. 20, 1894

Fire guts SecondCon, leaving only the stone walls and the steeple

1906

The first service is held in First Presbyterian's new sanctuary

1990s

First Presbyterian's congregation has to decide whether to move or refurbish its aging building; after a year of discussions, members prove their commitment to the downtown area and raise nearly \$1 million to upgrade the building

2007

First Presbyterian and SecondCon join with Emmanuel Episcopal and Court Street Methodist to form Jeremiah Development

2015

The Rev. Rebecca White Newgren becomes the first pastor of the newly federated congregation

1849

41 members who lived on the west side vote to open Second Congregational of Rockford on the west side of the river

1868

After changing locations to accommodate its burgeoning congregation, First Presbyterian moves to a location on North Main (where the telephone building now stands)

1892

SecondCon's current building is dedicated

1905

Construction begins on First Presbyterian's new building at 406 N. Main St.

1979

Another fire destroys the sanctuary and educational wing of SecondCon

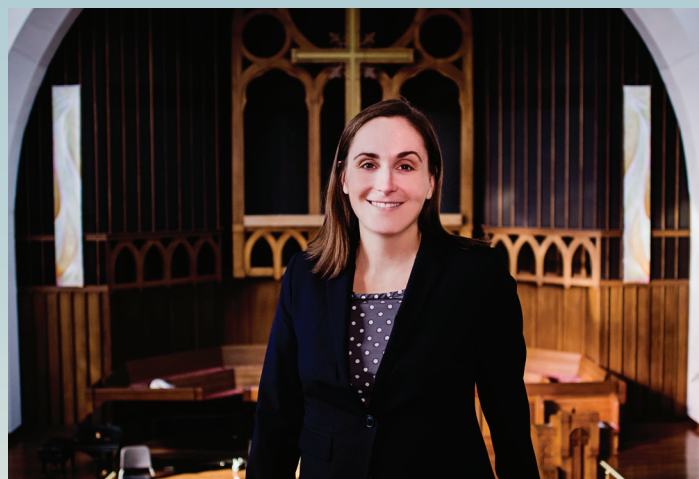
2005-6

SecondCon adds a gymnasium



Dec. 30, 2012

During Sunday service, First Presbyterian closes its doors for the final time; members walk to SecondCon where they're welcomed to their new home and the service continues



The Rev. Rebecca White Newgren moved from Philadelphia to become SecondFirst's senior pastor. She was unanimously elected.

The hospital really took the lead in that, and our church took the lead in housing it and supporting it with volunteers."

SecondFirst has committees and teams focused on everything from long-term planning – like finding ways to remain an anchor downtown – to finding creative ways to perform mission work. Sometimes random ideas prove the most successful.

"I remember when Rev. Rebecca said, 'We're going to have dinner in our parking lot. We're going to sit out in the parking lot with tablecloths and real dishes and whoever comes by, we're going to make sure there's room at the table for everybody.' We thought she was nuts." Hoff says. "But it was magical."

Pop-up dinners have become a semi-regular thing at the church. White Newgren says it's just one method of reclaiming downtown as a place of peace, hope and joy.

That commitment to downtown Rockford is evident from SecondFirst's proactive community outreach efforts. When Greenlaw asked teachers at nearby Haskell School – SecondFirst's official school – what simple thing they needed, they said something for kids to eat if they arrived after breakfast had been cleared away. So, Greenlaw started the Apples for Education program.

"We deliver a bushel of apples to the school every week, or as needed. It's like clockwork. People don't even think about it anymore, it just happens," Greenlaw says.

"What impresses me most about SecondFirst's commitment to downtown Rockford's community is their hands-on approach," says Kay Larrick, executive director of Carpenter's Place, one of several organizations with which the church partners. "They go beyond talking to doing. The people I know, and with whom I work at SecondFirst, have a sincere heart for service and respect for their downtown neighbors. This includes area businesses, residents, service providers, churches and those who are homeless. Their focus is not on what divides them, but on what can bring them all together."

Sometimes, SecondFirst makes financial contributions. Other times, it volunteers manpower or the use of facilities. When the gym was built, showers were included for Rockford Urban

The Bells of SecondFirst

Handbell ensembles were integral to the thriving music programs at both Second Congregational and First Presbyterian well before the churches merged.

During the massive fire that ravaged SecondCon in December 1979, the late Dick Litterst – then-minister of music and the creator of SecondCon’s handbell program; the church’s head housekeeper, Sally Cooper; and a good Samaritan risked serious injury to rescue the Whitechapel handbells from flames about to engulf the sanctuary. All of the bells were saved.

Today, SecondFirst has the world’s largest collection of Whitechapel handbells – 169 bells spanning nearly seven octaves – and that’s not even including First Presbyterian’s separately maintained set of 49 Whitechapel handbells, which are still used by the Carillon ensemble.

About 50 ringers make up the church’s five groups: Peanut Ringers (pre-school to grade school); Tower Ringers (grade school to middle school, beginner to intermediate); Carillons (intermediate); Bellcanto Ringers (adults, beginner to intermediate); and Martin Ringers (adults and teens, intermediate to advanced). Tower, Bellcanto, and Martin Ringers use a color-coded system so that anyone can participate, regardless of musical ability. Peanut Ringers has its own color-coded system that younger children can follow.

“Sarah Hallberg directs the Peanut Ringers, and Joyce Zartman directs the Carillons,” says Julie Cook Ramirez, who directs the other three groups and is the first person to serve in the newly created position of Director of Handbell Ministries.

A Rockford native, Cook Ramirez started ringing as a teenager at Trinity Lutheran Church before joining Westminster Presbyterian’s Glenn Ringers. She started playing with the Martin Ringers in 1994 and began directing various groups in 2003.

“As soon as Julie was in the process of taking the position, we sat down and thought, gosh, we could do something more than just a concert. Why don’t we do this for a reason?” White Newgren says.



Julie Cook Ramirez directs three handbell groups at SecondFirst and is the first person to serve as Director of Handbell Ministries at the church.

“We’d never used our concerts as mission-focused fundraisers before,” Cook Ramirez says. “It’s been an exciting and uplifting experience to see firsthand how we can use the power of music to bring about good for those programs and people in our community that need it the most.”

Last year’s Christmas concert raised \$500 for Transform Rockford’s Rebuilding Communities Around Peace (RECAP) program, and this spring’s concert raised nearly \$300 for SecondFirst’s partner school, Haskell Academy.

This year’s Christmas concert – featuring all five ensembles and church organist Valerie Blair – will benefit Carpenter’s Place.

“There will be a focus on home and the value of having a place to call home during the holiday season,” says Cook Ramirez, who incorporates popular music now and then to shake things up. “We’ll be honoring the men and women of Carpenter’s Place and raising critical funds for their mission.”

“Carpenter’s Place is thrilled to be chosen as the beneficiary of this year’s holiday handbell program at SecondFirst,” adds Kay Larrick, executive director of Carpenter’s Place. “We look forward to attending and enjoying the beautiful music of the handbell choirs.”

Music will include holiday classics, and Cook Ramirez promises a surprising finale. “My goal is to pack the house, raise an incredible amount of money for Carpenter’s Place, and then have everyone enjoy food and fellowship after the concert,” she says. ■



SecondFirst has the world’s largest collection of Whitechapel handbells. About 50 ringers participate in the church’s five groups, age preschool to adult.

See the handbells yourself at “Home for Christmas: A Concert for Carpenter’s Place” on Saturday, Dec. 9, 2017, at 4 p.m. at SecondFirst Church.

Ministries' work camp volunteers, who stay at the church each summer. When work campers aren't staying there, the showers are open two days a week to homeless people.

White Newgren is especially excited by a new partnership with KFACT – Keeping Families and Communities Together.

"That's a program Shamika Williams started that intensely mentors girls age sixth grade through post-secondary," White Newgren says. "She's had a 100 percent graduation rate from high school, and all but just a couple have gone to college. They just opened a space near us at Church and Jefferson, so we're trying to support their effort."

As head of Member Care and Neighborhood Connections, Erbe – who was officially installed as an assistant pastor in August – is always looking for little ways to help others.

"If somebody is in need of bus tokens or diapers, I'm the one," she says. "If someone has a job interview and needs an outfit, I'll go down to our thrift store when it's not open and get them a clean pair of pants or a new shirt to wear to their job interview."

The church plans to be a drop-in center for Just Breathe 815, an organization that provides clothes to homeless teens. "When they come here, they can take a shower, get help with homework, get a meal and have fresh clothes," Erbe says.

The focus is on resource-based community development.

"With the community garden, the basketball court, the pop-up dinners, the Party in the Park, we're trying things and looking for ways to support what the neighborhood has, wants and does," Greenlaw says. "In this community it requires the long view and patience."

All About the People

Kris Harden has become a fixture at SecondFirst since joining in 2012. He volunteers to wash dishes after Wednesday night dinners, stops by each Saturday before his janitorial shift at the Jubilee Center across the street, and, if the churchyard is messy, he cleans it up. He's there nearly every day, despite the church being



Kris Harden volunteers his time at SecondFirst to wash dishes after Wednesday night dinners and to provide janitorial service when needed.



SecondFirst hosts pop-up dinners in its parking lot on a regular basis. There's always room for anyone who stops by.

Second First Church Photo

a 20-minute walk from home.

When his wife, Laura, who has multiple sclerosis, feels up to it, she'll attend a Sunday service or other event with him.

"Since Dinner and a Movie has started back up, we try to make plans on Wednesday nights to eat dinner at the church and stay for the movie," Harden says.

But what keeps him coming back are the sermons.

"When Rev. Rebecca and Pastor Becky preach, they go in-depth," Harden says. "It makes you think. It's really, really positive. It's awesome. I'm not saying we're the best church out there, but it seems like they go out of their way to love people and to do what's right. We're not all perfect, but SecondFirst truly does try."

Newer members like Harden and longtime members who date back to SecondCon or First Presbyterian all seem proud that SecondFirst has not only maintained the original churches' commitments to community service, but has actively expanded it.

"We really believe this church can be a blessing, not only to us who come here, but to Rockford in general, and beyond," White Newgren says. "We look at what's going on in the community and how we can help, and how we can advocate for people who don't have a voice. We want to celebrate the good things that are happening."

While the church is excited by the revitalization of downtown Rockford, members also want to ensure existing neighbors will still have a place, and that residents – and the homeless – won't be driven out due to gentrification.

"I hope we're an integral part of the downtown community, being supportive of the broad socioeconomic strata as it gentrifies," Greenlaw says. "That we protect and nurture and support the least of who are here, and that they not be driven out, but are taken in."

"This is a place where you can find love and acceptance no matter who you are, no matter who you love, no matter what you look like. It's a place for everyone," Erbe adds.

Some churches have opted to build further out rather than staying downtown, but that goes against SecondFirst's mission.

"We'll be here for a long, long time," Hoff says. "I think a congregation that comes together with such purpose and such vision is here for the long haul." ■