

# What Does it Mean to Be the Church in the World?

*Rise & Shine, July 14<sup>th</sup>*

## **Matthew 18:20**

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

### **Questions:**

- What does it mean to *be* the church? What does it mean to *do* church?
- In our present society, does holding on to Sunday as the primary day of worship make sense? Why or why not?
- What new kinds of outreach ministries might be feasible for Redeemer given our current active membership and resources?
- Where do you see our current practice of holding onto Sundays as the primary day of worship failing? Where is it succeeding?

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*In the News*

## **Christian Groups Try New Ways of Doing and Being the Church**

If a church has no members, is not open on Sundays -- not even on Easter -- and doesn't try to evangelize, can it still be a functioning, active church?

The answer you'll get from supporters of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Center City Philadelphia is a resounding "Yes!" The church operates midday services Monday through Thursday and focuses on being present for the community and practicing an open-door policy that makes it a place of support for anyone in need the rest of the week.

Established in 1823, St. Stephen's is a castle-like Gothic Revival building in an active downtown Philadelphia neighborhood near Thomas Jefferson University Hospital that once had a large congregation. The building was designated a historical landmark in 1957 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. But in recent years St. Stephen's attendance had dwindled, leading the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania to close the church in 2016.

But then a new bishop for Pennsylvania, Daniel G.P. Gutierrez, called for the church to be reopened. "It's at the center of the (sixth) largest city in the United States. It's next to a major hospital. It's a beautiful space in itself, a

sacred space," Gutierrez told *Religion News Service*. "How many thousands of people walk through those doors? If it's offering different things and reopening it and re-envisioning what it could be to meet the needs of those people," the bishop added, "that's what we have to do."

The Rev. Peter Kountz was appointed to oversee a new version of St. Stephen's, which includes leading midday services Monday through Thursday. But more than the services, St. Stephen's started a neighborhood outreach program, opening the sanctuary to everyone from the homeless to patients from the nearby hospital and tourists.

"We decided this is our home, we're going to make it available to you," said Kountz. "We can give you safety, we can give you heat. We can give you coffee and fruit and cookies. We can give you conversation. We can give you quiet if that's what you want. We can give you a place to plug in your phone. That's it."

On a typical weekday, about 70 or so people come to take advantage of St. Stephen's hospitality services – while others meditate or even nap in the sanctuary. Most don't come expressly for the services, but Kountz leads the daily worship for anyone who cares to participate. "The most some people will do is sit in the back and listen to the remarks I make about the gospel," said Kountz.

"No, we don't try to evangelize," said Kountz. "What we do is we practice a ministry of engagement and welcoming."

Bishop Gutierrez commented, "We can look at goals, or we can look at the impact in the community. I'm of the belief that when you form a community based in Jesus and the love of Christ, then you will get resources, and then things will multiply. It's called faith – that it will grow, that people will come in, that they will become members.

"But that's not the end goal," Gutierrez said. "It's to be a presence in the community."

The nondenominational First Capital Christian Church in Corydon, Indiana, has taken another approach in an attempt to bring the gospel and fellowship to isolated communities that are overlooked by typical Sunday church worship structures.

Their "Church Anywhere" initiative empowers volunteers to situate micro-campuses of the main church in places like prisons, rehab centers, public schools and even private homes. The intention is to make church more

accessible and less daunting for those who may be unlikely or unable to attend worship in a traditional building on Sunday morning.

Both of St. Stephen's and First Capital have found ways to *do* and *be* the church in nontraditional circumstances and connect with people who are outside the churches' usual spheres of influence.

The Church Anywhere initiative of First Capital Christian Church is more evangelistic in its goals, but like the St. Stephen's effort, the intention is to be in ministry with people who might not come to a traditional Sunday service and are thus underserved by the church.

Since First Capital launched its Church Anywhere program three years ago, the congregation has launched micro-campuses in prisons, foster-care centers, rehabilitation facilities, elementary schools and homeless shelters. Some church members have launched their own micro-campus inside their homes after noticing that their neighbors were not leaving their homes on Sunday morning.

"We are passionate about empowering our people to go out and be the church, which is why we call it 'Church Anywhere,'" First Capital engagement pastor Tyler Sansom told *The Christian Post*. "It's empowered our volunteers basically to bring the church to whatever they're passionate about."

Most of the services consist of the two worship songs and a 15-minute sermon, followed by 30 minutes of small-group discussion time.

While the micro-campus services are run by volunteers from First Capital, those leaders are led and trained by volunteer campus pastors from the church who have more experience.

"They go through training with us when they open their campus," said Sansom. "And then they also go through a shadowing process where they shadow two or three of the other locations to see how they do it," he continued. "So, we don't want to just throw someone into the fire without making sure they're ready."

First Capital now has 16 micro-campuses, including an online campus. The church is open to partnering with anyone who has a desire to bring a micro-campus into a community they are passionate about.

"The sky's the limit," Sansom said. "I have no idea what the next stage is going to be."

Here are some Bible verses and a question outline to guide our discussion:

**1 Corinthians 9:20-22**

*To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. (For context, read 9:19-23.)*

**Mark 4:33-34**

*With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples. (No context needed.)*

**Prayer for the Mission of the Church (BCP p.816)**

Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*