

Trying new approaches in Yonkers and Scarsdale

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THE JOURNAL NEWS

(Original publication: May 5, 2003)

To transport the theology of John Calvin, the famously strict and humorless Protestant reformer, to the modern-day Nodine Hill section of Yonkers might sound like an academic exercise, if not a Monty Python skit.

Take steady doses of Scripture. Live by an unflinching moral code. Accept the responsibility of every believer to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

It might have worked in 16th-century Switzerland, where resentment of Roman Catholic rule demanded an alternative. But what about Nodine Hill, where mothers try to protect their children from violence, immigrants are desperate for work and education, and hundreds are recovering from a devastating fire that feasted on three blocks of ramshackle homes?

Ezequiel Herrera-Rodriguez, 33 years old and Dominican born, is trying to spread the word, or at least a softer version. He is Calvin's man in Yonkers.

"I'm Pastor Ezequiel, and I'm from that church up there," he says in Spanish or English to everyone he meets: laborers looking for work, women pushing strollers, teenagers spending a weekday morning standing around. He points up to Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, a brick castle behind iron gates.

Most stare stone-faced. Some nod politely. But interest perks up when Pastor Ezequiel offers classes in English or sports for children, even a new worship service in Spanish.

"It's always an adventure, but I just go ahead and talk to the people," he said. "I go out and preach the news of salvation. For a long time, Presbyterians did not do that."

Only a few years back, Good Shepherd and the two other Presbyterian churches left in Yonkers were ready to meet their maker. Like so many mainline Protestant churches in greater New York, they were nearly out of money, energy and old white folks who were raised in the old Protestant traditions. They were so cut off from their neighborhoods that many people living nearby thought the silent

churches were already closed.

But a last-ditch effort to breathe life into the three churches is now under way. Its success or failure might signal whether mainline Protestant churches, which have been rapidly losing membership and relevance for decades, can find a new spiritual niche in today's urban reality.

The Yonkers Project, as it is known in Presbyterian circles, is among several efforts by mainline denominations in New York to awaken from their slumber and transform their long-stagnant churches into modern mission centers. While Presbyterians in Yonkers are reaching out to one type of neighborhood that mainline churches have neglected — one that is home to immigrants, the poor and the working class — a reborn Lutheran church in Scarsdale is trying to connect with another, very different lost community: the well-to-do.

"The challenge here is to get past the gates, up the long driveways and find out what the people in those big homes need," said the Rev. Carla Meier, who is trying to ignite Hope Lutheran Church. The church was closed for two years after its former congregation dwindled to nothing but reopened in the fall with a whole new game plan.

Whether they like it or not, the Yonkers Project and Hope Lutheran are church laboratories for the future of mainline Protestantism in New York.

Catholics all around

Herrera-Rodriguez, in at least one sense, is the perfect messenger to represent the Presbyterian church in Yonkers. He grew up in a country where three-quarters of the people are Roman Catholic. But his grandparents were converted by Presbyterian missionaries during the 1920s.

He knows what it's like to be the Protestant minority.

In Nodine Hill, where one corner boasts a Polish deli, a bodega, an Arab deli and a Chinese restaurant, the religious mix is thick. But as in all of Yonkers, most people were baptized Catholic. Almost no one is Presbyterian.

"I believe that we, as Bible-abiding Presbyterians, have the truth, but my approach is nondenominational," Herrera-Rodriguez said. "We try to create an

atmosphere, an environment in the churches that is comfortable. We say, 'Come to us with your problems — an unfair landlord, alcohol, finding a job — and see what we have to offer.' Once they're comfortable, we can talk business."

As part of the Yonkers Project, Herrera-Rodriguez is the youth minister and Hispanic minister for all three Presbyterian churches. He and the churches' three pastors are working hand-in-hand to blur the boundaries between church and community.

The project was born of desperation in the late 1990s. The Hudson River Presbytery, the regional arm of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), decided to make one last, all-out go at reviving things in Yonkers. Officials found three pastors who were excited at the chance to remake their churches, while maybe saving lives and souls. All three stepped right up, with their spouses, as Yonkers boosters and community leaders. Sunday morning services are just one thing they do.

"This is not about bells and whistles or high-tech anything," said the Rev. Marv Root, pastor at Bryn Mawr Park Presbyterian Church. "When people come inside, they feel some spiritual energy. They see people who don't look like them. I tell the congregation that a diverse group is not normal in a mainline church, but it's a matter of life or death."

Root was pastor of a new, growing church in California when he ran into the Rev. James Vande Berg, head of the Hudson River Presbytery, at a conference. Root volunteered to write a paper about how to bring back the Yonkers churches and eventually was coerced to apply for a minister's job in Yonkers. He never intended to take it.

He started in September 1999. Since then, he has helped bring aboard the other new ministers and become president of the Lincoln High School PTA.

"You know, I feel real spiritual growth here and a lot of caring," said Lori Plair, 47, who joined Bryn Mawr a year ago so she could take her 11-year-old son, Joshua, to church. "I've gone through a lot of hardship and gotten help from all three congregations. I mean, three congregations. I've learned that if you put yourself

in God's hands, it will all work out."

Bryn Mawr, which gets about 60 people at services, gained eight new members in 2002. It was the church's first growth in 25 years.

The three churches combined see 150 to 180 people at Sunday services. Their goal is to have 265 people in the pews by 2007.

The churches may need to be funding themselves by then, as well. The presbytery began paying part of the ministers' salaries three years ago. It spent \$95,000 last year and has budgeted \$81,000 for this year. The support is scheduled to end in 2007, although the presbytery is now seeking grants from the national church.

One person at a time

The three churches work together like an extended family spread across one town.

Root's church hosts a weekly dinner and Bible-study program for adults and children called "Spiritual Adventure." South Presbyterian Church, pastored by the Rev. John Muffler, a former Roman Catholic priest, is home to English classes for immigrants. Good Shepherd, where the Rev. Debra Avery is pastor, hosts a Spanish-language service that's growing by the week. Good Shepherd also helped start a desperately needed neighborhood group last year after a toddler and an 18-year-old died from gunshots in separate incidents.

It all comes down to soothing one human struggle at a time, the pastors say. The act of trying will produce positive energy that will fuel the churches into the future. "It's a new day," Avery said. "Protestant immigrants are not coming off the boats anymore with cardboard suitcases and walking up the hill to our churches. The immigrants now are Spanish-speaking or from Southeast Asia, and we have to meet them where they live. I'm not so much about filling the pews as I am about people knowing that we're there for them. It's hospitality without strings."

This newfound connection is the reason that Good Shepherd was able to become Nodine Hill's instant relief headquarters in March after fire charred a row of houses, killed four and displaced hundreds. Within 24 hours, the church was

buzzing with volunteers sorting donated clothes and stacking rows of canned food.

The operation grew so large that Avery and her congregants could sneak away for Sunday morning services without being missed.

Barbara Brill, an elder at Good Shepherd, said she doesn't think the congregation could have done it before Avery and the Yonkers Project arrived.

"We would have wanted to do something, but I don't think we could have," she said one morning while counting donations in singles, fives and tens. "What's happening here is because we are connected to the community. People are starting to know this church."

The change in Good Shepherd's profile is so clear that one Nodine Hill native, Paul Siegert Jr., a lawyer who now lives in Manhattan, recently pledged up to \$100,000 for Good Shepherd to buy a piece of land for a youth center, senior residence or another good cause. He said that he left a large Presbyterian church in Manhattan to help Good Shepherd spread its new hope and energy.

"I believe God sent me back to help out," he said before an Ash Wednesday service. "Giving money is the easy part. The tough part is for the church and the people of Nodine Hill to give their time and effort to turn things around. We can't force people to come to this church. But if we plant the seeds, God will take over."

Herrera-Rodriguez stumbled on a breakthrough during a recent mission walk around Nodine Hill. He stopped into a restaurant run by a fellow Dominican, Tony Estebes, 36. Not only was Estebes "happy to have a Dominican pastor around," but he said that his daughter had started visiting a youth program at Bryn Mawr Church.

"He knows the church," Herrera-Rodriguez said. "Last time I stopped here, no one did."

"I'm a Catholic," Estebes then told him in Spanish. "But if I can't go to a Catholic church, I might go to another one."

Having hope in Scarsdale

If Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church in Yonkers is trying to find its footing, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Scarsdale finally fell in November 2000. A long-shrinking congregation took its last breath. Its denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was left with a nearly 14,000-square-foot church at a high-profile Scarsdale intersection on Post Road.

Officials considered selling the building, but decided it would be a cop-out. They couldn't give up on a church surrounded by homes and families — even if most of the people are Catholic or Jewish or work too many hours to find time for worship.

Last fall, the church reopened with a makeover: introducing Hope Lutheran Church.

"The conventional wisdom is that it takes a generation to build a new congregation," said the Rev. Meier, who came from a Long Island church to serve as midwife to Hope Lutheran. "My timetable? We're hoping to be here a long time."

Hope Lutheran figures that its only chance is to develop as a neighborhood church, something the previous congregation was not. Since the neighborhood is hyper-educated, cultured and professional, the church started by hosting classical-music performances, music classes and a lecture series. Plans include a nursery school with Spanish lessons, a music ministry, a community garden and possibly after-school programs.

"Our particular challenge is that in well-to-do neighborhoods, people may think that they don't have any needs," said the Rev. H. Gaylon Barker, Meier's husband and the director of the ELCA's new Center for Public Theology, based at Hope Lutheran. The center aims to, among other things, increase the Lutheran presence in New York.

For its first year, Hope Lutheran's Sunday mornings are centered on Bible study. One Sunday brought together 10 hearty souls, mostly relatives of Meier's and supporters from other Lutheran churches. They talked about Jesus' early miracles and his ability to heal.

"We're thinking about things that touch people's lives," Meier said. "People's backgrounds don't matter so much if you connect with their passions and needs. Churches that are struggling are disconnected from people."

Robert Lund, 71, of White Plains, a cradle Lutheran from Minnesota who still belongs to a church in Jefferson Valley that he helped start in 1968, said Hope Lutheran is facing quite a challenge.

"It's going to be difficult, all right," he said. "If people understand who we are, not the Christian Right but people interested in the spirit of the Bible, this church can grow. But this area is so established, so set."

So what does Martin Luther, father of the Reformation, have to say to Scarsdale in 2003?

Mainline Protestant denominations in New York struggle to explain their 500-year-old theologies and traditions to modern neighbors who haven't a clue. They usually preach a general Protestant message, offer their traditional liturgies and hymns without explanation, and try to make people feel welcome.

At Hope Lutheran, where the church's future might depend on non-Lutherans, Martin Luther's message still hangs in the air, Barker said.

"The core of our tradition revolves around grace," he said. "Grace reshapes your life. It is a commitment to improve your world. It may not always be explicitly stated. But the core values of our faith come through."