



Broad Street attendees are an eclectic and diverse group. Photo by Toya Richards Hill.

Unanswered questions abound: Should it become a church? Should it officially be Presbyterian and go under the presbytery fold? Could this be a model for new church development denomination-wide?

The Rev. Ed Gehres, executive presbyter of Philadelphia Presbytery, said while some might be antsy about a band of Presbyterian churches developing something that's outside the PC(USA) structure, what's happening at Broad Street is an "experiment" that ought to be allowed to happen.

Most churches were historically started by other churches, and "that model worked for a couple of centuries," he said. "There's nothing wrong with it. Just let them be."

"Test out what works and doesn't work," Gehres said. "Broad Street is an experiment. ... So far it seems to be working."

Ultimately, "He (Golderer) might be better off not being connected to the presbytery," he said.

Jarvis and her cohorts think so too, particularly given the current times when "people don't identify denominationally," she said.

"It cuts across the lines of all those things that have divided us," Jarvis said of Broad Street. People are attracted to it "because it's not a church," said the Rev. Nancy Muth, the minister at First Presbyterian Church in Germantown.

"This ministry had to start brand new, fresh," Muth said.

Old Pine Pastor Deborah McKinley said Broad Street could be a "laboratory" for other PC(USA) congregations, particularly ones in urban settings like hers.

Already, she said, Broad Street has taught her to "start where the people are. You start by listening and paying attention to where *they* are."

Golderer believes "the ministry will define itself," and he's asked his original supporting churches for a three-year commitment. The ministry also is rolling out a congregational action partnership in October with other Presbyterian churches in Philadelphia in order to develop a "mutual mission opportunity," Golderer said.

"This whole thing is a Holy Spirit-driven enterprise," he said. And ultimately, "the community will call the shots on the future."

Ask the community what they think Broad Street should be now and in the future and many of them will tell you simply, it really doesn't matter.

"It's just funny how we have to put everything in a box," Merli said. Broad Street, "It's personal."

"It already is whatever it is for whoever goes," said Alex Libson, Broad Street's summer intern for the last two years and a junior at Davidson College. "Right now, it's what it is."

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Broad-minded faith

Philadelphia ministry seeks to re-connect those detached from religion in an artsy environment

[by Toya Richards Hill](#)



Broad Street's small, subtle sign invites people into its "broad-minded faith community." Photo by Toya Richards Hill.

PHILADELPHIA – There are two unassuming little signs posted outside a massive old Gothic church in Philly's downtown arts district that speak volumes.

One is black and the other is green, and both display the same logo – two thick lines intersecting to form a crossroads.

The signs are gentle invitations to come inside, speaking mainly to those who might be at a spiritual crossroads. All are welcome at Broad Street Ministry, self-proclaimed "A broad-minded faith community."

It was the signs – situated amid the lively district that includes The Kimmel Center for Performing Arts, The University of the Arts and a host of live theater venues – that drew in Randall King and girlfriend Kirsten Merli.

The two had been struggling to find a spiritual home, both saddled with negative baggage from churches that either scorned them or were religion cloaker in backbiting and capitalism.

One day, walking along Broad Street, the couple spotted the signs attached to the former Chambers-Wylie Memorial Presbyterian Church, which closed in 2001 after attendance dwindled to nearly nothing.

Shortly after the closing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Philadelphia Presbytery began leasing space in the church to The University of the Arts, which holds classes there, and in February 2005 it agreed to lease space for Broad Street to use.

"That sign stood out to me," said King, whose mother was a Baptist minister and who said that as a kid, "all I knew was church. We went every day."

Yet disillusioned by church inner workings that he "disagreed with," King stopped going to church for about 18 years.

"I didn't need to go to church," he said, adding that he still remained spiritual. "I felt warmer people at the bar."

Merli, too, felt disenchanted by church. The daughter of an Episcopal priest, she had bounced around to different congregations as an adult "looking for a genuine group of people."

It had been about five months since she had gone anywhere regularly – she was no longer welcome at her last church when it was made clear that a personal lifestyle choice she'd made "was totally unacceptable."

Then Merli and King saw the Broad Street sign, and subsequently began attending service there.

At Broad Street there is "no judgment, no harsh conviction," Merli said. "That felt good," King said.

And though it's described as a ministry and not a church, "I call it my church," Merli said. "It's more of a church than I've seen my whole life."

A concept under development



Broad Street founder and convening minister the Rev. Bill Golderer shown here in prayer. Photo by Toya Richards Hill.

Attracting people like King and Merli is precisely the goal of the Rev. Bill Golderer, Broad Street founder and convening minister.

Described as a “connector,” Golderer set out to create a ministry that weaves together people who have lost hope in, or are detached from, the organized church with the vibrant arts and business community in downtown Philadelphia.

It was a concept that had no concrete blueprint, so Golderer, with backing from a core group of five local Presbyterian congregations, set about developing Broad Street Ministry.

“There is a large mission that I think the (Holy) Spirit has put in front of us,” said Golderer, an ordained PC(USA) minister and 1996 graduate of Yale Divinity School.

“What motivates me is this idea that this tired old ship called the church speaks deeply to people,” he said.

Broad Street is intentionally not part of the PC(USA)’s Philadelphia Presbytery, but instead a non-profit ministry of Old Pine Presbyterian Church, where Golderer is on the payroll. Technically Old Pine leases the Chambers-Wylie space on behalf of Broad Street.

Along with Old Pine, the other churches equally supporting the ministry are The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, First Presbyterian Church in Germantown and Wayne Presbyterian Church.

Broad Street has a board of directors and the ministry’s finances are accounted for through Old Pine, but for the most part Golderer has been empowered to develop the ministry as he and a small band of workers he’s amassed see fit.

“Bill’s really the catalyst for this,” said the Rev. Cindy Jarvis, pastor of The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. “A lot of it was Bill coming to us.”

Golderer, whose resume includes founding director of the Center for Church Life at Auburn Theological Seminary and associate pastor for youth, young adult and public church ministry at Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, was at a ministerial crossroads when Broad Street bubbled up.

“I was in the desert. I didn’t know what I was going to do,” said Golderer, who had recently moved back to Philadelphia where he grew up.

He was struggling with the notion that many Presbyterian congregations “don’t reflect the fullness of what Christ intends for the church.” And though he knew he could exist in that world, “I didn’t think it was faithful to shoehorn myself into that form, just to have a job.”

At the same time, former Bryn Mawr pastor the Rev. Gene Bay and Jarvis were tossing around the idea of developing some sort of “out-of-the-box” ministry for Chambers-Wylie. Bay thought of Golderer, who previously attended Bryn Mawr and had been under the church’s care during his ordination process.

The parties met, Golderer proposed the Broad Street concept and a match was made. In May 2005, Broad Street Ministry launched.

Go to Broad Street’s Web site, www.broadstreetministry.org, and you won’t see anything that even remotely resembles anything Presbyterian. That, too, is intentional.

The site talks of Broad Street as an “emerging community of faith that honors creativity in all it pursues, strives to extend hospitality intentionally to each and all, works tirelessly for a more just and compassionate city.”



Worship at Broad Street is held in the round in an intimate setting. Photo by Toya Richards Hill.

Worship, expression and service to others are listed as the reasons the ministry gathers, and the site lauds life as an “integrated pilgrimage toward wholeness — with no distinctions drawn between that which is sacred or secular.”

Bible study and other classes that might typically fall under Christian education are handled through the ministry’s Center for Subversive Theology, and programs have covered everything from mental wellness for older adults to a discussion of the Rev. Jack Rogers’ new book, “Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explore the Myths, Heal the Church.”

“We are trying to be authentic in the way that we do ministry,” said Warren Cooper, Broad Street’s convening minister of music and an elder in PC(USA). “You’re motivating people to be responsible about how they deal with their own spiritual identity.”

Food also is huge at Broad Street and usually accompanies most gatherings. Golderer has created a special meal held every other month called the No Barriers Dinner, which invites the neighborhood’s elite business people to gather for a meal with the area’s regulars and have-nots. In October, the meals will take place every month.

Again, using his skills as a connector, Golderer has marshaled together big corporate giants like international food services company Aramark and natural and organic foods retailer Whole Foods to donate to the meal.

Golderer takes comfort in the fact that Philadelphians from the highest income brackets mix with city dwellers that have no incomes at all at the No Barriers dinners. And, he said, it works.

“This really is the embodiment of Christian mission the way it was meant to be,” said Jeff Libson, Broad Street’s board chair and an elder at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church.

No barriers breeds diversity

The no barriers concept permeates Broad Street Ministry, and can especially be seen during worship, initially held once a month at 6 p.m. but now taking place every other Sunday. In October, worship will be every Sunday at 6 p.m.

Scan the crowd that gathers inside the old Sunday School room of Chambers-Wylie and you’ll find an eclectic mix of young people still fresh from college, elderly folks from the nearby senior center, typical buttoned-up Presbyterians, and a wide range of colors, hair textures and sexual orientations.

“Some of the most unlikely people in the world come to this church,” Golderer said.

Oddly enough, they all seem to fit, and Golderer and Cooper unobtrusively guide the worshippers through a service that doesn’t beat them over the head with Christianity, but also in no way veers from it either.



A jazzy ensemble helps minister to worshippers. Photo by Toya Richards Hill.

All the things you’d expect to find in church are there – hymns, scriptures, a sermon, communion and even baptism – but the execution of them is completely unconventional.

Worshippers gather in chairs arranged in the round with the communion table in the center, candles lit throughout the room and even on the balcony ledges set a soft tone, and a jazzed-up ensemble led by Cooper takes traditional hymns like “Sweet, Sweet Spirit” and “There Is A Balm in Gilead” and crafts them into their own.

“This is not (just) a feel good groove,” Cooper said. “It feels good with substance.”

And for many who’ve had it with the traditional way of doing church, Broad Street’s method is the perfect fit.

“I was completely disillusioned with Christianity,” said John Francis, who was raised in a Pentecostal Episcopal church but who’s had a hodge-podge of religious experiences. “I still liked Jesus, but I didn’t care about the trappings.”

He said when he met Golderer, “I was down with his method, as well as his madness.” Plus, “he didn’t need to give me a line. The persuasion of honesty, that works for me.”

Broad Street attendee Amber Mizerak said she “hadn’t been to church in years.” Forced to go to confirmation classes as a child, she said she saw few examples of people actually living what she learned.

“I believed in God and would always pray,” she said of the time she wasn’t connected with a church. But “I wanted to find where I belonged.”

Now, Mizerak is Broad Street’s emissary for synergistic adventures. “I like to think of myself as a “Telling the Story Ambassador for Broad Street Ministry, and I am always trying to find ways to synergize with creative/artistic/empathetic/advocacy types throughout the city,” she says in her profile on Broad Street’s Web site.

Oddly enough, one of Broad Street’s biggest fans – and a large financial contributor – is its most Presbyterian.

Jack Asher, whose family’s Asher’s Chocolates has been in business for almost 114 years, has committed \$50,000 over three years to Broad Street. The ministry’s first-year budget was \$116,000, \$36,000 of which came from its supporting churches and the rest of which came from donors like Asher.

An elder at First Presbyterian Church in Germantown, which Asher says is “heavily involved in urban ministry,” Asher is troubled by the state of the PC(USA) and its lack of focus on mission.

“The Presbyterian Church is literally brain dead,” said the over-70-year-old Asher. “I think we should have a Presbyterian-wide rally in this church.”

The church needs to get “evangelical. We’ve got to get some hoopla in it,” he said. “There’s just no get up and go.”

Philadelphia-area Presbyterian churches are closing and “the presbytery is dying,” Asher said. Meanwhile, Broad Street “is something that is going up hill.”

‘Holy Spirit-driven enterprise’

Golderer will be the first to admit he’s not sure exactly where Broad Street Ministry is headed, and he said the participants themselves will largely set the direction of the ministry.