

A downtown St. Petersburg church holds fast, expands as others fade away

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In Print: Sunday, July 10, 2011

The Rev. Miller stands in front of the church's stained-glass windows.



[DIRK SHADD | Times]

As other downtown churches have faded away, First United Methodist Church of St. Petersburg has stayed rooted and acquired almost the whole block on which the sanctuary stands. A six-year plan calls for expansion of programs for all ages.

ST. PETERSBURG

Although several congregations have abandoned the downtown core in recent years, First United Methodist Church of St. Petersburg is solidifying its presence amid a diverse setting of condominiums, restaurants, nightclubs and street people. A new sign on one of the church's six buildings hints at what the congregation calls its "six-year vision" for additional classrooms, meeting rooms, a new preschool building and expanded space for counseling and outreach. The fact is,

the church at 212 Third St. N has plenty of room to spread out. With one exception, it has acquired the entire city block — between Second and Third avenues N and Third and Fourth streets — on which its historic sanctuary stands.

The Rev. David Miller attributes the decadeslong acquisition to the foresight of church leaders and a commitment to stay in the city's urban core.

"They felt led to remain downtown and to thrive downtown," said Miller, the church's senior pastor since 2007.

Over the years, First United Methodist has fended off tantalizing offers for its prime properties near Williams Park and the city's waterfront.

"They want to build apartments. They want to build stores. So the temptation is always to want to sell to gain money and build a better facility," the pastor said.

Other downtown churches did choose to sell and leave. Faced with dwindling numbers, First Church of Christ, Scientist sold its historic building, which is now the Palladium Theater. Before that, First Baptist Church of St. Petersburg moved to Gandy Boulevard, selling its historic property to St. Peter's Episcopal Cathedral. Nearby, First Congregational United Church of Christ closed its doors altogether and sold to developer Grady Pridgen. A few blocks away, the former Mirror Lake Christian Church has been transformed into the Mirror Lake Lyceum.

The struggle for survival among downtown churches is not unique to St. Petersburg. Last month, the historic First United Methodist Church of Tampa held its final service.

The commitment to stay downtown is not without challenges, Miller said. "How do you have a vibrant children's ministry in the same context of a ministry for street people?"

Yet his church of about 1,700 is doing both. Its membership includes some prominent names, among them former Gov. Charlie Crist, state Rep. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, former Mayor Bob Ulrich and former City Council member Virginia Littrell.

First United Methodist's quest to acquire neighboring properties began in earnest in 1969. The most recent purchase came in 2008, when the church bought a piece of property at 219 Fourth St. N from nearby St. Peter's Episcopal Cathedral. The building on the lot will be empty in a

few weeks, after the law firm that rents it departs.

A two-story building at 201 Fourth St. N that had been rented is also available for the growing congregation. The church bought the building in 1998 from the Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida. In the years that followed, the church rented it to St. Petersburg College and more recently to St. Peter's as the cathedral completed an expansion and renovation project.

"Now that they've moved out of it, we hold some classes in there and we hold meetings in there and we're in the process of working with the city to renovate it for administrative offices," said Nelson Dort, First United Methodist's business administrator.

"The church is growing, and nine months out of the year there is demand for every available space."

During the last week of June, the church had 250 children in its popular vacation Bible school. Its preschool for 145 children, which usually has a waiting list, shares rooms with Sunday school classes.

"We'd like to build a new preschool building in two years and expand the preschool," Miller said.

The congregation launched a \$1 million capital campaign in February to pay for new air conditioning for the sanctuary and the first phase of renovations that would let members spread out across the campus.

The six-year plan calls for tripling the ministry teams that work in the community and doubling the number of small groups meeting to build fellowship and grow spiritually. "That's the main focus of our vision, and to do that, we need classrooms," Miller said.

Besides, he said, First United Methodist also needs additional room for its growing Celebrate Recovery ministry, a biblically based 12-step program in which participants worship together before breaking into small groups to combat problems such as drug and alcohol addiction.

The church's red brick sanctuary, completed in 1926, is the centerpiece of the city block campus. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and its Tiffany-style stained-glass windows include a 10- by 18-foot re-creation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*.

The church is one of two historic Methodist congregations downtown. It was originally called St. Petersburg Methodist Episcopal Church

South. At the time, it was part of the Southern movement that split with Northern Methodists over slavery. Christ United Methodist, at 467 First Ave. N, was affiliated with the Northern branch. The 1939 reunification of the two sides left St. Petersburg with two Methodist churches blocks from each other.

There is room for both, Miller said.

Gretchen Hastings, spokeswoman for the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, agrees. "We believe the two will successfully coexist in the community as long as their ministries are vital and healthy," she said.

What's behind First United Methodist's stability?

"I feel the way God has chosen to bless us," Miller said. "The leadership, they've had foresight and they've had commitment and they've had generosity. And the revitalization of St. Petersburg has been important."

For the moment, the church is not trying to buy the lone property on the block it doesn't own, America's Best Inn, at 342 Third Ave. N.

"At this point, it's not necessary. We have enough to do now," Miller said.

The congregation passed up the opportunity when the property was offered at a reasonable price years ago, he said. When it came back on the market again, it was too expensive. Meanwhile, First United Methodist is content to own the parking around the hotel and rent it to the facility. Still, Miller said, it would be nice to have the entire block.

"Yes, we would like to complete it off," he said.

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First United Methodist's downtown properties

Year purchased	Address	Price paid
1900	212 Third St. N	\$1,200
1945	Second Avenue N, vacant land	\$30,000
1960	Second Avenue N, vacant land	\$175,000

1969	Third Avenue N, vacant land	\$50,000
1976	Third Avenue N, vacant land	\$95,000
1978	Third Street N, vacant land	\$45,000
1981	Third Street N, vacant land	\$65,000
1985	241 Fourth St. N	\$395,000
1990	256 Third St. N	\$295,000
1998	201 Fourth St. N	\$480,000
2000	Third Street N,	\$135,000
	vacant land	
2007	275 Fourth St. N	\$600,000
2008	219 Fourth St. N	\$570,000

>>Stained-glass tours

Docent-led tours of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, re-created in stained glass, are at 10 a.m. Wednesdays at First United Methodist Church, 212 Third St. N, St. Petersburg. Special tours may be scheduled. Free. Call (727) 894-4661.

[Last modified: Jul 09, 2011 04:31 AM]

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