

connections

Calling the church to faithful new life



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A resurrected congregation

A central Texas church has been resurrected, to the surprise of many people who have known it earlier. For years, United Methodist district superintendents who were responsible for it saw it as a problem church, and it has features that many pastors and lay members say make growth or even survival impossible.



It's a small congregation with a large historic building. It is in a small town in a rural area. The town has few businesses and no industries, and it isn't very close to any metropolitan area or on any major highway. Many church members and other residents are elderly, the age often seen as conservative traditionalists, reluctant to consider change or new information. All that this age group usually seems to want their church to do, many pastors say, is stay in existence long enough for their funerals.

A problem church became a solution

But despite such features that are so often said to make growth, change, and even survival impossible, big changes have happened in First United Methodist Church of Bartlett, a central Texas town with a population of 1800. The congregation is not only surviving but growing. Why?

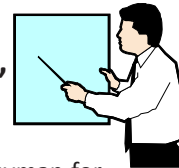
The main reason seems to be that two lay members who both cared a lot about people and about social justice recognized each other as kindred spirits and dreamed a lot of dreams together.

Then — the essential step — they turned their dreams into reality.



These lay members were Joyce White, a retired public-school teacher, and Nellie Saage, then in her 80s. Mrs. Saage, who died recently at 86, was in charge of the church's Good Samaritan fund, which helped low-income people with utility bills, food, and other

A wake-up call for a "toe-in-the-water Christian"



Attorney John Roark of Temple, Texas, had been an active United Methodist layman for years, teaching Sunday School and doing other typical volunteer jobs in a large church. But he was only what he calls a "toe-in-the-water Christian," and he says, "I thought that was enough." Six years ago, to his surprise, he suddenly realized that it wasn't.

A life-changing, late-in-life religious experience caused him to be newly passionate about following Jesus. He had survived two major cancers and a heart attack when he developed an extensive, life-threatening infection. He was in the hospital, in ICU, when he became aware of someone in his room during the night. A voice said, "You are not going to die; I am not through with you yet." But his nurse assured him that no one had come into his room. "I used to not believe that epiphanies were real," says Roark, "but now I'm not so sure."



Scarier than the Supreme Court

After recovering, he took the UMC's "Lay Speaking" courses, became a lay minister, and started filling in on Sundays at little churches. Then three years ago when FUMC-Bartlett couldn't afford a full-time pastor, the district superintendent asked Roark to go there, and he went, as a "supply pastor," the UMC's lowest pastor category, for only a small salary plus a small Good Samaritan fund.

John Roark is now 73 and has been in personal-injury law for nearly 50 years. He has appeared before the Texas Supreme Court, but unlike his court appearances, he says, being a pastor, telling people what he believes, has been scary. Both his legal experience and his AA experience as an alcoholic who has been sober for 30 years are helpful in pastoral counseling, however, and his political beliefs support his ministry. He is what he calls a social liberal, rare in this very conservative part of central Texas. He doesn't talk politics in the church, he says, but he feels that his political beliefs require doing what the Christian faith also requires.



such needs. Mrs. White, a Bartlett native then in her 70s and recently widowed, often helped her.

“We could do that”

Visiting shut-ins, they saw that many were lonely, isolated, and sometimes even hungry. They soon realized that Bartlett also had other hungry people who needed to be fed, and they felt, “We could do that.” They had both grown up during the Depression and had cooked all their lives. So they enlisted other church members to help, and started doing what was needed, even though most members were elderly and the church had never done any such project previously.



Joyce White, Nellie Saage, and other lay volunteers started the church’s food ministry by preparing and delivering a home-cooked meal every week to seven people. All seven were suspicious when the meals were first offered to them. “Is there a cost?” they asked. “Do I have to fill out a form? Listen to any sermon?” To their surprise, the answer to all these questions was no. It still is. Says pastor John Roark, “We don’t investigate people. We don’t do any conditional giving.”

A church giving itself away

One pastor who gave early encouragement was Lianne Turner, a second-career clergywoman who was at FUMC-Bartlett from 2002 to 2006. Bartlett was her first full-time appointment, but she had been effective in her previous career as a college teacher and is an excellent preacher. She calls FUMC-Bartlett “an amazing story of faith in action—a church that decided that if it was going to ‘go out of business’ it would do so by ‘giving itself away.’ ”



After two other pastors served briefly, Jack Riley, a retired clergyman in his late 70s, was appointed as FUMC-Bartlett’s part-time pastor and welcomed as a God-send. He is a people-oriented extravert, well-read, an outstanding preacher, and an innovator with a broad theological perspective. He had been a district superintendent, then a successful pastor of a large church for 13 years, and then started a new UMC congregation. Before going to FUMC-Bartlett, he had theoretically retired, but he still wanted the challenge of helping to bring a so-called “problem church” to life.

After another seminary student, the current pastor, John Roark, was another God-send. Joyce White

greatly appreciates the fact that he so strongly supports what the lay members are doing. But she emphasizes that even when other pastors were less helpful, that didn’t keep the lay group from pressing forward. “We kept going anyway,” she says.

Visits are as important as meals

The list of regular food recipients started growing and never stopped. In March 2009, the FUMC lay group created Food for Friends as a 501(c)(3) organization and started keeping records of how many people they were feeding. They now deliver weekly meals to 150 people, and in the next couple of weeks, they will deliver the 26,000th meal. They find that the visits they make when they deliver the meals are as important as the meals.

Unexpected help



A few years ago, an Austin man came to Bartlett to see what this surprising group was doing. He saw that they needed more space and better equipment. He said he wanted to build them a commercial kitchen. They couldn’t believe he was serious, so they let it drop. But soon he phoned back to see why he hadn’t heard from them. He said he could have a crew there in two weeks, to start building, and he sent

an anonymous gift of \$40,000 to cover it. He had a 25’ x 25’ commercial kitchen built behind Joyce White’s house, with all the needed commercial appliances and other equipment.

I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. ...

—Matthew 25:35-36

Other checks have kept coming, too, several from Texas and even one

from California. An anonymous \$10,000 has come every Christmas. An Austin charitable organization has recently asked to make Food for Friends one of the five projects it gives to regularly, and a county Democratic group has also made donations. Yet Food for Friends has never solicited funds.

Food for Friends volunteers aren’t all Methodists. They include a Quaker, a Unitarian, and an agnostic, and some live in towns several miles away from Bartlett. They come to the kitchen at 6 A.M. every Friday and on Thanksgiving and Christmas, to prepare the meals and then deliver them on three routes, in Bartlett and also some nearby towns.

Much more than food

In fact, FUMC-Bartlett has provided much more than food for people in need. During the recent unusually cold winter, the church furnished new sweatsuits for all of its meal recipients. It also bought the necessary yarn and enlisted the illegal immigrants' wives who live at a nearby immigration center to crochet lap blankets for 185 people, including the meal recipients, and located coats and jackets for those who needed them. And in the recent unusually hot summer, FUMC distributed 30 fans and many gallons of water. The congregation recently started a milk ministry for children, delivering 12 to 15 gallons of milk every week.

“Look for the one with the fire”



The church's recent pastors haven't needed its parsonage, so the church turned it into a “closet” for used clothes plus household supplies,

packaged food, and used eyeglasses.

Not long ago, a Hispanic man came into the church building during a meeting. He had just arrived from the Rio Grande Valley, and he and his family were hungry. He said someone where he came from had told him that when he got to Bartlett he should go to the church for help. When he asked how to know which church, they said, “Look for the one with the fire in the window.” The group with “the fire in the window” – the UMC cross and flame symbol – gave him and his family immediate help.



FUMC-Bartlett does some activities jointly with a nearby church whose members are African-American. One was an evening Vacation Bible School attended by African-American, Hispanic, and Anglo children – Bartlett's first such VBS. An-

other recent success was a joint Halloween party. It featured not typical trick-or-treat candies, but rather all-you-can-eat hot dogs, sandwiches, chips, and games. Nearly 200 children came, and parents came too, and ate and played games with their children.



In addition, the church has erected a basketball goal in its parking lot. Local police first came and told neighborhood African-American children they couldn't play on the “white church” property, but Pastor Roark soon persuaded the police to back off.



Roark and FUMC members are heavily involved with area school students and teachers. FUMC is the smallest church in Bartlett but is the one that gets called on when school teachers see children who need jackets or equipment. Three years ago, the school asked for 25 backpacks. This year FUMC furnished 111, filled with all necessary school supplies, to children in Bartlett and a few in nearby towns. When nine baseball players couldn't afford gloves or cleats, FUMC furnished them.

Does politics matter?

Although rural areas seem to have become more conservative statewide, the encouraging pastors at Bartlett have all been theologically progressive, and the food program founders were described to me as “two of the very few ‘yellow-dog Democrats’ ” in the local area. Of course, many conservative churches also feed the hungry and help children. But FUMC- Bartlett 's welcoming stance toward all people seems to give it a special spark, and its kindred spirits, despite being in the minority locally, strengthen each other for taking on challenges. Some members have even read progressive writers and studied systemic causes of social injustice, in addition to combating its effects. I sus-

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I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

pect that this openness to social change is an important part of what has made FUMC Bartlett stand out from so many other rural small-town churches.

FUMC members don't want to appear to be bragging by publicizing their ministries, but I believe other congregations whose size and location are similar can gain from seeing what such a congregation can accomplish. So when I heard what was going on in Bartlett, I wanted to make it known. Maybe reading it will even help larger churches!

Making life better for all people

"We always welcome all comers and treat them with great dignity," Joyce White says of her church.

"We want to help make life a little better for all people." She learned the importance of this attitude early, she says, from the families who raised her after her mother died when she was five. In the Depression, despite having to watch every penny, they all fed hungry men who came to their doors. One family even gave each man a penny postcard to mail in order to let someone know where he was. They all told Joyce, "You weren't put on earth just to take care of yourself."



She still takes that to heart. "I don't want to be in a church that is just a museum, that stays apart from what is happening in the world," she told me. "That is not what Jesus said to do."

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"We just do it. When you step out in faith, wonderful things happen."

Increased church membership and attendance haven't been the aims of FUMC-Bartlett's ministries, but they've happened. No children were coming when John Roark arrived as pastor, but 12-15 children ages 3-14 are coming now, and he is teaching the first confirmation class that the church has had in 20 years—three children. He reports that the church has had about 20 baptisms during his three years there.



Roark tells about a recent visitor who had her 10-year-old daughter with her and was facing immediate brain surgery. She told him she wanted to be at FUMC the day before the surgery, because it was the one place where she and her daughter felt safe and wanted. When a lesbian couple had been attending FUMC-Bartlett for several weeks, they asked Roark if they could join. He said "of course." Both women joined, and the one who hadn't been baptized was baptized. One church member stopped coming for a few weeks because this upset her, but she soon returned.

FUMC-Bartlett has no paid staff. Only Roark is paid. Everyone else is a volunteer. Among them, Roark calls Joyce White "a catalyst for everything." She sees no reason to think that tiny, small-town churches like hers are hopeless. "There's nothing we can't accomplish," she insists. She points out that while in many churches it's necessary to get a committee's permission to do what's needed, "in Bartlett, we just do it, and when you step out in faith, wonderful things happen."