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Please see the following article about First Presbyterian Church of Wichita, Kansas, and about its pastor, **The Reverend Dr. Catherine Miller "Cathy" Northrup**, who has been one of our seminar members for the past ten years and is vice-president of the board of directors of the Foundation.

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A small revival

First Presbyterian Church reversed a years-long membership decline in 2007 by adding a few folks.

BY JOE RODRIGUEZ

The Wichita Eagle

Just more than three years ago, some members of First Presbyterian Church talked about a bleak outlook for their church -- a place with a 138-year-old history in Wichita. As in many other downtown churches nationwide, membership at First Presbyterian had been declining for years, and church leaders began to hear concerns about the future of the church.

"Many people thought they were the generation to close up the place," said the Rev. Bob Hoover, the church's interim pastor in 2004, who heard those comments from some members.

But not many are talking that way anymore.

For the first time in more than 20 years, the church has experienced an increase -- albeit a slight one -- in membership. Church giving in 2006 increased 20 percent over the previous year. And it increased 10 percent last year from 2006.

And just as important, church leaders say, more families with young children -- greatly underrepresented for years -- have recently joined the church.

It has all contributed to new life at what was once written off, by some, as a dying church.

"I sense an excitement," said Chris Kubik, a longtime church member. "I've heard people say that. There is a feeling of life and excitement for the life of the church."

Leaders spark change

Members such as Kubik credit the change to the church's leaders.

They cite Hoover, who spent 14 months at First Presbyterian as interim pastor, and the Rev. Cathy Northrup, who came to the church as pastor and head of staff in December 2005.

"I think Bob sort of set the stage, and then Cathy came along, and through very hard

work, and through a very high level of commitment and not taking no for an answer, made it happen," said Rick Wedel, who has been a church member for nearly 20 years. "And the people rallied around her."

Hoover, now interim pastor at Darnestown Presbyterian Church in Darnestown, Md., said that when he arrived at First Presbyterian Church in October 2004, several church members were "down on themselves."

Part of his job, he said, was to encourage the congregation and remind members about the great things happening at the church. Among them:

- The church helps run the Economy Corner, a thrift store at Central and Broadway.
- It owns a 40-acre campground at 9601 W. 73rd St. North in Valley Center -- a rarity for any congregation in the Presbyterian Church.
- And the church has an active music ministry.

"It was a matter of saying... 'Let's talk about what we have,' " Hoover said, "and that was the emphasis -- to rejoice in what was still going on there."

When Northrup arrived as pastor in December 2005, she said the groundwork was laid for the church to work, grow and move forward.

"This church had envisioned itself... a dying congregation, and was focused on negatives instead of what was good," Northrup said.

"And I think (Hoover) helped them say, 'Hey, we have some great things, there is hope.'

"I think to have that attitude laid allowed me to hit the ground running so that when I came, there were things that we needed to do -- and there still are -- but people were ready to work."

Listen and challenge

Northrup didn't start with drastic change, though.

Instead, she followed her understanding of ministry: to love, to listen and then to challenge.

So she first visited with people. She listened to their stories and experiences.

"And then," she said, "I challenged them."

That challenge meant recognizing that some things about the church had to change, Northrup said.

One of those was the church's attitude, she said. Times had changed from the church's heyday 50 years ago, when downtown churches were the "megachurches."

"In the past, mainline denominations thought, 'Well, here we are a beautiful church downtown, people will come,' " she said. "Maybe they will, but you also have to invite them."

So Northrup and the church's discipleship committee stepped up their invitation and welcoming efforts.

Discipleship committee members pay extra attention in welcoming visitors to church. Northrup follows up with them. It's about building relationships, she said.

"Instead of just saying, 'We're a nice church, we're welcoming,' " Northrup said, "we focus on 'How do we welcome?' "

She stressed that it was important for people to reach out to invite their friends and neighbors and others, and members responded.

That's how 14-year-old Nathan Rule came to the church -- a friend from school invited

him to a youth group program.

Nathan became involved in the church, and soon the rest of his family was attending, and they were inviting others. The Rule family -- parents Kevin and Christine and their three children ages 14, 12 and 10 -- have attended First Presbyterian for nearly two years.

"It's been a wonderful experience for our family," said Kevin Rule, who had not attended church regularly before coming to First Presbyterian.

The church has also established a "shepherding program," in which the congregation is divided into smaller groups and a church leader serves as a liaison to those members to help keep them active in the church.

In 2006, the church established a Stewardship Committee -- something the church did not have. That work resulted in more good news: Giving increased 20 percent in Northrup's first year and another 10 percent in her second.

And Northrup also helped implement traditional ministries that she felt were important, including an all-church Bible study.

"People," she said, "want that kind of stuff."

More work ahead

While things are looking up, Northrup is the first to acknowledge that the job isn't done.

"Ministry, I feel called to it," Northrup said, "but every day is a challenge."

The church is looking at launching a capital campaign to address facilities needs, such as a new roof for the sanctuary. She said the church also plans on developing its small-group ministry.

And, as always, challenges remain on how to grow membership, she said.

The church had a slight increase last year -- from 678 to 680 members -- but the numbers don't tell the complete story, she said.

Consider, she said, that the church -- with an older congregation -- loses about 30 to 35 people a year due to deaths or moves.

"So it is huge," she said of the recent membership gain. "Although it's just two members, it's huge."

Members say it's that kind of attitude -- and results -- that has them pleased with Northrup's leadership.

"Cathy is just so warm and gracious and inclusive," said Wedel, the chairman of the church's search committee that selected Northrup.

Members say they hope the church continues to meet the challenges ahead.

"I've always wanted to be a member of a downtown church, and yet knew downtown churches were in crisis," Wedel said. "And to see this (change) happen is incredibly refreshing."

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Grace and Peace,

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