

# RESPONSIVE Congregations

*Case Studies from Religion & Urban Culture 2.0*

## OUR NEIGHBORS, OURSELVES:

### *From Congregational Mission to Community Transformation*

In 2001, at the age of 50, Becky Hagarty felt a powerful calling to be of service. “I was being pushed by a higher power,” she says.

Hagarty had volunteered with Indianapolis-area nonprofit organizations all her life, so she had a long history of living her faith through service. And she is part of a proud tradition of people who’ve done the same. Her church, Second Presbyterian, dates to 1838. Abolishing slavery was part of its founding mission. The pastor during its first decade, Henry Ward Beecher, became a nationally renowned minister and abolitionist. Hagarty’s family connections to the church date to the 1930s, when three of her grandparents were members. She was 9 when the church moved from downtown to its cavernous, neo-Gothic building at 7700 N. Meridian Street. “It was a “cool age to be in that building and know every nook and cranny,” she says.

sensed it would mean stepping out of her comfort zone, to find the place where her service would have the most impact. She initially focused on Center Township—i.e., downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods—where poverty has historically been visible and concentrated. “I assumed we would be looking to the inner city, because that’s where the poverty is,” Hagarty says. “When you want to do something, that’s where you go.”

“*I was being pushed by a higher power.* — BECKY HAGARTY

### Things did not turn out that way

A conversation with a fellow church member, who served as a volunteer in a public school near the church, led Hagarty to focus closer to home. The volunteer commented on the “unbelievable” poverty among the school’s students. Hagarty set up interviews with staff at the Trustee office in Washington Township (where Second Presbyterian is located), which provides emergency financial assistance to residents. And she set up interviews with social workers at other organizations to get a sense of local needs. They all told her that the most urgent need in the area was a food pantry—a place where local families could get groceries to tide them over in the short term.

That was the origin of an outreach program at Second Presbyterian called Northside Mission Ministry (NMM). The food pantry is its founding and anchor project. Each month, it serves between 400 and 500 families, distributing roughly 15 tons of food. The pantry inspired several members of the church to create and maintain



Yet this calling felt different—more urgent—than anything she had ever experienced. “The tap on the shoulder had become a punch,” Hagarty says. She



a community garden on the church's property, to help keep the pantry stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables in the summer and fall. They even drilled a well to supply the site with water.

NMM is ongoing and evolving. What it will become is an open question. From the beginning, Hagarty imagined the pantry as the foundation of a much more ambitious vision. "Our hope and goal was that the food pantry would be just a first step," she says. "You're basically just sticking your finger in the dyke in the wall to keep the water from coming in. You need to go further."

She and others want NMM to evolve into a sort of full-service community center, providing not just short-term food relief but a wide range of services that empower people over the long run. They frame this distinction as providing transactional (short-term) relief versus transformational (longer-term) solutions.

As a congregation of 3500 people, with a tradition of social engagement and a history deeply rooted in the life and history of the city, Second Presbyterian brings exceptional resources to these challenges. Its story is both out of the ordinary and broadly relevant for what it says about the possibilities—and limits—of congregational programs that aim to move beyond short-term solutions.

As much as it is a story about transforming others, though, NMM's story is about congregational transformation. It is about how members relate to each other and to their immediate surroundings. "I always felt that if you were doing the work that, as Christians, we are called to do, you are a missionary—whether it be in your own backyard or halfway around the world," Hagarty says. "So, part of my push was getting my church to realize that you can be a missionary and not even leave the church building."

### **Northside Mission Ministry**

It took eight years from Hagarty's calling for NMM to get off the ground. Although Second Presbyterian earmarked funds for the food pantry in 2001, a partner organization near downtown, Westminster Neighborhood Services, needed its help, and that took priority in the near term.

In 2009, Hagarty became the co-coordinator of the Presbyterian Women (PW) group at the church. (PW is a national organization with local chapters). That created a window of opportunity for her to resurrect her vision from several years before. With some new PW funding and the funds set aside in 2001, the food pantry began operating out of a small room furnished with donated refrigerators and freezers. A nearby (now-defunct) grocery store, Marsh, sold

them food at a discount. The clients came by referral from the Washington Township Trustee and local schools. She and her PW co-coordinator, Ellen Gullett, oversaw the work.

NMM soon moved to a bigger space and expanded its client base and capacity. In 2011, a retired General Motors engineer, Don Brindle, began volunteering with the pantry, devoting 40-plus hours every week to the work. Brindle, who had quadruple bypass surgery in 2009 following a heart attack, had a spiritual awakening and decided to become more active in the church, which was then making plans to celebrate its 175th anniversary. Brindle's background in automotive engineering—and in “organization, projects, and getting things done,” as he says—was critical to the pantry's sustainability and growth through the years. Among many other roles, Brindle had once been the program manager of a team that developed a new series of transmissions for Allison Transmission (a division of GM at the time). The more he and his wife volunteered at the pantry, the more he understood how his organizing and management skills could improve its operation. That knowledge translated into more responsibilities, more time commitment—and more passion for the work.

NMM was one focus of Second Presbyterian's anniversary-related fundraising campaign. The food pantry served roughly 45 families each week at the time. The goal was to expand its operation to meet the growing food-pantry demand. More broadly, Hagarty, Gullett, Brindle, and others wanted to expand it beyond a food pantry—toward a full-service community center offering a wider range of services.

## **NORTHSIDE MISSION MINISTRY MISSION:**



*By following Christ's example, care for the poor and those experiencing hardship in Washington Township by building relations with them to develop food security, to work toward economic stability, and to participate fully in the life of the community.*

## **Visioning**

In 2012, NMM's leadership initiated a nine-session visioning program in collaboration with the Polis Center, a community-focused applied research center at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. Drawing on the center's SAVI database, Polis staff gave NMM leaders and volunteers an overview of the needs and gaps in emergency services in Washington Township.

NMM received \$500,000 in funding as part of the church's 175th anniversary campaign. The projected cost of creating a community center was \$3.5 million. The expected funding sources were foundation grants, direct pledges, partnerships with local organizations, and Second Presbyterian Church.

Two near-term outcomes emerged from the 2012 visioning process with Polis. In 2014, NMM became a partner of Gleaners Food Bank—a hunger-relief organization with more than 250 partner agencies across Indiana. To comply with Gleaners' guidelines, NMM initiated several reforms. For example, it no longer provided relief on a referral basis; it was required to serve anyone in need. It also changed the setup for “shopping” in the food pantry, so that it resembled the experience of browsing in a grocery store.

A second change was that, in 2016, NMM moved away from using strictly volunteers. A paid, part-time began staff member began coordinating the operation, which also was organized as a 501c-3 nonprofit and put under the governance of a board of directors. The idea was that the board would be able to raise funds from foundations—which typically require grantees to be organized as nonprofits—and would benefit from the board members' advice, experience, and connections.

## **An uncertain path**

Through the years, NMM has initiated several programs to extend its work beyond the food pantry. Some have been a success—notably the community garden on the church campus, which helps keep the pantry stocked and provides hands-on education to community members. Others, like NMM's financial education and legal ministries, quietly faded away or, as with a utility and rent assistance program, dissolved into a local organization better equipped to administer it. Second Church still provides funding to support that program.

Beyond the food pantry, one of NMM's most successful and enduring projects is a partnership with nearby Greenbriar Elementary School. Volunteers from the church serve as tutors and mentors to its students. NMM provides financial help to parents and clothing and supplies to students, and it helps teachers pay for classroom supplies. Greenbriar students reciprocate by holding an annual food drive at the school. The proceeds go to the NMM food pantry.

For all the success of the food pantry and the school partnership, though, the broader vision for what NMM could be—the goal of building a community center that offers a wide range of life-management, job-skills, educational, and counseling classes—remains unfulfilled. And the path there is uncertain.

Even so, the mission behind the goal is as clear as ever: To create transformational change in the place that Second Church has called home for nearly two centuries, among people who—members or not—belong to its community.

“If the world belongs to God and we are God’s people in the world, then we are called to live out of God’s vision for the world,” says Rev. Chris Henry, who became Second Presbyterian’s senior pastor in 2018. “And to me, what that looks like is impactful engagement in places where there is inequality, whatever that inequality looks like—economic, racial, cultural, whatever.

“What we don’t want to do in the lives of families that have pressing needs is say, ‘Here’s a one-time contribution to solve your immediate needs, and don’t come back and see us again.’ I’d rather say, ‘How can we be in relationship with you over the long haul?’ Even if that means fewer contacts at first, I think it also means we’re bringing transformative rather than temporary change. We want to go deeper, not just broader.”



In that sense, the food pantry and the school partnership are a foundation on which to build a full-service community center. NMM provides opportunities for relationship-building, and it’s a tool for expanding connections and networks between people and institutions that might otherwise never intersect. NMM volunteers at the food pantry get to know the stories and experiences of individuals and families, and the tutors at Greenbriar build relationships with children and their parents.

But that kind of informal relationship-building only goes so far. And it depends heavily on volunteers who usually have limited experience or training in offering the kind of help people need.

“It’s easier for us to do transactional things than to do transformational things,” Brindle says. “Going into a pantry—passing out food to people—is easy. Sitting down and working with somebody to help them with their problems, to get out of poverty, and developing a rapport with them—and trust—takes time and energy and skills and knowledge and things of that nature.”

“When you do a food pantry, your job as a volunteer is fairly straightforward,” Hagarty says. “When you get into some of the other things that we had envisioned—like English as a Second Language classes, nutrition classes, financial education and aid, job assistance—it becomes

## SECOND PRESBYTERIAN MISSION:



*Second Presbyterian Church is a welcoming community of faith where Jesus Christ transforms lives.*

much more personal. And that leads to a very different comfort level. When a client leaves a food pantry, they're happy. The volunteer is happy. Everybody's good."

Can NMM still deliver on the less straightforward, more personal work of transformation?

"A lot of things have to line up for it to happen," Hagarty says, "but I haven't given up hope. I have not given up hope that we can move to the transformative program that we initially envisioned."



*The Polis Center's SAVI study was the biggest change. It helped us to look east and west. And if you look east and west, it's a totally different community.*

— REV. DAVID BERRY

### A congregation's inner work

Transformation can work both ways. If NMM has not yet achieved the initial vision for it, the ministry has nonetheless had a profound impact on the church. This is true on multiple levels.

One is members' ability to see the needs right in the shadow of the church, which were there all along but easy to overlook.

The church's campus on Meridian Street—the city's main north-south artery—means that large homes and imposing institutions dominate the nearby landscape. Seeing the need requires some digging and curiosity.

"In Washington Township, the poor look like me," Hagarty says. "For one thing, we don't have [a large] homeless population. Most of the poor are working poor, and many of them are living in three- and four-generation households."

Rev. David Berry, Second Presbyterian's associate pastor for mission, says NMM has reoriented the church's focus. It traditionally looked to the north (where many church members live) and to the south (toward the visible poverty of downtown).

"Our members, when they traveled to the church, were coming from Hamilton County and the north," Berry says. "The Polis Center's SAVI study was the biggest change. It helped us to look east and west. And if you look east and west, it's a totally different community."

### More than us and them

A second level of transformation involves the collision of abstractions with experience.

"What surprised me the most was my assumption that we would mostly serve minorities," Hagarty says. "That proved false in the first few months. It's probably 50/50. That opened my eyes right then and there to how little I knew."

Rev. Henry noted that "it is so easy to stereotype people who are homeless, people who are poor and struggling one way or another. And so many of these stories fly in the face of those stereotypes. So often, that's where I find the transformation comes. To say, now I know people and what I realize is that every opportunity I've been given in life has been denied to them in one way or another.

"Then I'm going to live differently. I'm going to see my neighbors differently. I don't have a stereotype in mind. I have a person in mind, or a family in mind, or a story in mind. Which often defies the stereotype."



A third level of transformation at the church is not solely a result of NMM, but its energy feeds into the ongoing change. Second Presbyterian has created two task forces—one devoted to “race and welcome” and another devoted to local mission outreach. The goal is to help members understand the church’s history better, and to grapple with some of moments when it has not lived up to its ideals.

As the mission statement for the race and welcome task force notes, “We have been moved to examine the expanse of our welcome and to acknowledge the places where we were complicit—whether consciously or unconsciously—in the maintenance of injustice.”

“Second Presbyterians was started as an abolitionist congregation,” Rev. Henry says. “So, it’s in our DNA to have this courageous voice around important issues facing the city. But, like many white congregations, we haven’t always used that voice to its full power.”

The task forces are working with Rev. Henry to create an agenda of seminars, presentations, and action items. Some will focus on internal changes, others on improving the church’s outreach to broader communities.

### Three takeaways

Second Presbyterian’s decision to better understand its history and role in the life of Indianapolis connects with Becky Hagarty’s eye-opening moment when she felt called to initiate a food pantry in 2001.

One takeaway from her experience over the past two decades is that a process of listening and learning—before acting—is vital.

“One of the mistakes made by good people that want to help is that they assume they know what needs to be done,” Hagarty says, “instead of asking what needs to be done. I don’t know if I would have considered a food pantry to be the number one need in the north side of Indianapolis.

“So, you’ve got to educate yourself in whatever endeavor you’re doing. You’ve seen where there are massive hurricanes, and people send semis full of clothing. And it sits there because that’s not what they need. So, you have to find out what the need is and be willing to accept the answers that you’re given. You have to do your homework.”

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— BECKY HAGARTY

A second takeaway—and a dilemma at the heart of many congregational outreaches—is that volunteers are critical to work, but their level of commitment is not predictable or guaranteed.

NMM’s food pantry now has a paid, part-time coordinator, Lisa Enright, who oversees the work of the roughly 50 volunteers who help keep it going. After more than a decade of operation, it’s well-integrated into the church’s mission and programs, and it has a self-sustaining momentum. But its founding depended on Hagarty’s calling, and its expansion through the early years depended on the long hours that she, Ellen Gullett, and Don Brindle and others devoted to it on a purely voluntary basis.





**“OUR CALL IS NOT TO BE SUCCESSFUL  
BUT TO BE FAITHFUL.”**

— REV. CHRISTOPHER HENRY

Brindle’s background in engineering was key, since he had the skills for coordinating, organizing, and managing the different elements of the pantry’s operation. As a retiree, he also had the time and—like Hagarty—he felt passionately called to the work.

NMM’s early development, in short, was driven by a balance of idealism and practicality. There was a powerful founding vision, but there was more than that. There were volunteers—especially Brindle—who bought into the vision and had considerable time and skills that they were willing to devote to it.

A third takeaway is that, even if it does ultimately fulfill the most elaborate vision of what it might be, NMM’s success cannot be reduced to numbers. A community center offering a full range of services—if it becomes a reality—will still have a limited impact on the life of the city or state as a whole. But for the faithful who feel the

call—or the “punch” on the shoulder, as Hagarty says—there are other metrics of value.

“Our call is not to be successful but to be faithful,” Rev. Henry says. “I have this one life. Each of us has this one life. And we have this common life as a congregation. The goal to eradicate poverty in the city of Indianapolis would be a wonderfully worthy goal for this or any congregation.

“But for me what is far more important is, did we make wise, faithful use of the resources we were given? We’re very good at being able to see what we haven’t done. Sometimes it’s important to say ‘Yes, but here’s how we’ve been faithful to the call.’”

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*Written by Theodore M. Anderson*



# NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW PARTNERSHIPS

*Lisa Enright | Coordinator of Northside Mission Ministry*

We have and continue to cultivate relationships that make this mission what it is today. We work closely with like-minded partners to share ideas and product to support each other's mission to feed our community.

We are a Gleaner's Pantry Partner and participate in their Direct Agency Pick Up where we work with local retailers to receive donations from their stores. We are also a TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) partner with Gleaners, which allows us to increase the allocation income qualifying clients. Thanks to these partnerships, we offer fresh produce, protein, and dairy each time our doors are open. We recently purchased a box truck from a grant from our Presbyterian Women's group. This truck has allowed us to procure healthy food in bulk from many of our partners.

We work closely with Nora Ambassadors which is an advocacy group that can assist our neighbors with housing, education, social, and food needs. They work to provide services to families who need an advocate. Ascension Health, where an ecumenical group gathers to share ideas and hear about social and healthcare advocacy groups that can assist our families, and the Indy Hunger Network, where we meet quarterly with other pantries, also are partners. Although the dream of a community center has not been realized, we are working to assist those needing additional services.

We have also cultivated relationships with schools in our community. We have high school students from Brebeuf Jesuit, Cathedral, Carmel and North Central working and donating to our pantry on a regular basis. We had younger students (pre-COVID 19) from The Orchard School and Park Tudor engaged in our

mission and with our community garden. We just started a partnership with our backdoor neighbor, St. Luke's Catholic School, where their cereal drive gathered an amazing 2 tons. We are thankful for these partnerships as they allow us to have a greater impact in the community.

We continue to grow and innovate based on community needs. Our mission task force is currently working on a few projects that will be introduced shortly to increase our reach in Washington Township and engage our members in deeper relationships with our community. A new partnership is forming with our neighborhood schools, Greenbriar and Willow Lake, in which NMM will put small nonperishable food pantries in these schools to be administered by the school's social workers. We are also in talks with North Central High School to provide a similar program for their students.

We have a dream to provide some food delivery service to those who cannot reach us because of transportation needs or are homebound. Stay tuned to see how we grow and innovate to reach more of our neighbors in need."

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*By Lisa Enright*

*Responsive Congregations* is a publication of the Project on Religion and Urban Culture 2.0, a joint initiative of the Polis Center and IU School of Liberal Arts, both at IUPUI. RUC 2.0 examines how Indianapolis-area congregations have adapted to rapid social and technological changes since 2000, using findings from an earlier project (RUC 1.0) as a baseline. Both projects have been supported by a grant from Lilly Endowment, Inc. For more information, contact [polis@iupui.edu](mailto:polis@iupui.edu).