

Back at the burning bush

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [November 11, 2015](#) issue



Members of Friendship Presbyterian Church worship in a rented train station. Photo courtesy of Friendship Presbyterian Church.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “Earth’s crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes, / The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.” The members of Friendship Presbyterian Church longed to awaken to the heaven-crammed earth, so pastor Shawna Bowman constructed a five-foot bush out of a building tube, foam, and wire. She lit it up with Christmas lights and paper flames. Then members of the congregation asked one another, “What is our burning bush?” Each person plucked a flame with words of mission on it: “To speak up in truth.” “To work for peace.” “To forgive.”

The people at Friendship Church are creative on many levels. They regularly construct art in worship, celebrating with paint, paper, and color. Bowman has an undergraduate degree in studio art and art education, along with years of experience in teaching art at an elementary school. Friendship draws from her experience, setting the communion table with dishware from home, decorating the church windows with acrylics, and creating swirling murals. The people have also learned to be creative as they form their community and shape their narratives.

Friendship began when six churches of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), located within a five-mile radius in northwest Chicago, met with one another to see if they

could collaborate. All were struggling to maintain big buildings. “They went through a really hard process—grief work and identity work,” Bowman said.

Those who couldn’t imagine being without a church building pulled out of the process. In the end, only two congregations were left, and the remaining people wondered if it was worthwhile to keep working on creating something new. They decided that it was.

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church and Norwood Park Presbyterian sold their properties, let go of their management structures, merged their ministries, and hired Shawna Bowman as pastor. In one way, they were a church in redevelopment—a merger with 50 core members. In another way, with their sense of innovation and adventure, they were like a new church start.

“There’s no ‘what we’ve always done,’ there’s only ‘what we want to do,’” Bowman said. “The remaining members have resiliency and hopefulness. They are open and fearless.”

Friendship rented a train station for its new venture—a stunning space, where the sunlight from clear windows reflects onto key-lime walls. The church is growing. A third of the members come from St. Andrews, a third from Norwood Park, and the final third are new members. Because of the intense process that they went through, people established deep, abiding relationships, which is why they decided to name themselves Friendship. “Even though it’s cheesy, it’s perfect for them,” Bowman explained.

I wondered about the merger process, since I have heard nightmares of pastors trying to settle turf wars between various matriarchs and patriarchs. When I asked Bowman if the former congregations ever went through power struggles, she said they didn’t. “On any given Sunday, you can’t tell who is from the legacy congregations. I can’t always remember, and the new people don’t know at all.” It’s an intergenerational congregation, spanning from children to people in their nineties.

Lately, Friendship has embarked on a new adventure in creativity: learning to talk about the faith. People began by learning to tell stories. They worked with a comedian from Second City, the improvisational theater group where many of the country’s greatest comedians started their careers. They began to use story-starter questions at the beginning of every meeting, and they work with stories in worship.

For instance, they did a series on feasting, and each week told stories about Jesus at table. They set the communion table with dishes from home, and remembered their own experiences of mealtime. They used questions like, “When did you have a surprise guest? What was your warmest meal? When have you felt unwelcome at a dinner table?” They recalled rich smells, delicious food, family dramas, dear friends, and awkward reunions. Bowman hopes that the constant creation of stories will lead to a better evangelism.

People at Friendship fell in love with the intimate feel of the train station, but now they’re realizing that it served as a powerful metaphor. It was just a stop for the congregation. They are outgrowing the space and looking for another place to worship.

“We are talking with a lot of partners,” Bowman said. They want a building that’s in use seven days a week in ways that reach out to the neighborhood. They would love to share a space with a not-for-profit, collaborate with a service organization, or partner with a social entrepreneur.

In all of the transitions, they’re going back to that burning bush, finding earth crammed with heaven, and joy in the wilderness. “We’re still doing good work around who we are and who God is calling us to be,” Bowman said. “We’re not in the Promised Land yet.”