

On a mission: What happened to mainline churches

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

When asked, "Whatever happened to the mainline Protestant churches?" as I often am, I respond: Mainline decline is an old, tired story, but mainliners' mission is urgent. How are mainline churches recovering? By going local in order to turn global.

Let me explain. Philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who has written on the paradoxes of modernity, gives us a clue: today, he says, people who are poised to be cosmopolitan tend to trust and share the local more than before. Mainliners, who may have been put off by what they often perceive as remote mission causes—church budget items that are bureaucratic or generic—are relearning outreach by beginning where they are: at home.

If you want a sense of what churches are up to in regard to outreach, scoop up Sunday church bulletins from 30 or so mainline churches, throw in bulletins from Catholic parishes, synagogues and some evangelical congregations, and study their weekly calendars. One sees that these congregations are filling urgent needs and niches in their communities as they serve the homeless and ill and hungry, act as companions to the dying and offer hospitality to addicts—on whom the doors are shut when the professionals go home.

I have one case study in mind, prompted by a line in Robert Franklin's portrait (in the e-mail newsletter *Sightings*) of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, a congregation slammed by some political media folk, especially from the right. Franklin contrasts Trinity with Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood, and suggests that Fourth is less well located for serving the city's working poor.

Having studied Fourth Presbyterian for decades, including as adviser for a dissertation on the history of the mission of the church (see James Wellman's *The Gold Coast and the Ghetto: Christ and Culture in Mainline Protestantism*, published by University of Washington Press), and being an appreciative attender on occasion

as well as a friend of the pastor, John Buchanan, I naturally have an interest in the place. In responding to Franklin's comment about Fourth, I'd point to some of the ministries there. Yes, Fourth Pres is atypical in that it is large and endowed, but it is typical of mainline churches in its self-concept, mission and outreach.

Here is a denominationally responsible mainline church in mission. A few examples: volunteers from the church tutor 400 inner-city kids who live a few blocks away in the Cabrini Green housing area. More volunteers and a staffer or two invented the Near North Magnet Cluster Schools Initiative to link with public schools. Drop in at most any hour at the church's Social Service Center and you'll meet homeless, hungry people.

Teamed with Catholic Charities and using their facilities, Fourth Presbyterian weekly serves suppers to several hundred people; the church hosts a health-care center and does all kinds of things for and with seniors (aka "Life and Learning" people); it offers counseling, cultivates gardens in the ghetto, sends relief teams to other continents, sponsors an AIDS clinic and earmarks two-thirds of its budget for mission.

There's a church somewhat like this one not far from you—one which may have less money for missions, but the same focus on "mainline" mission far and near.