

Doors open to the city: The privilege of serving downtown

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

Having had the privilege of serving downtown churches in Columbus, Ohio, and in Chicago, I have watched city churches struggle to respond faithfully to dramatically changing environments. Broad Street in Columbus is a street of churches—stately edifices constructed in a time when many of the members lived in the surrounding neighborhoods. But the neighborhoods changed. Members moved away. Gracious mansions became the home of doctors' offices and nonprofit organizations. New residents never found their way into those imposing church buildings. Every one of those churches experienced a significant decline in membership, and each responded in a different way. When Columbus erupted in riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., the National Guard bivouacked in the huge church parking lot by the Presbyterian Church behind a chain-link fence constructed for security reasons.

My predecessor led that congregation to turn its attention to the neighbors beyond the parking lot. The fence was removed. The city's first Head Start program was launched in the church's education building, and a food pantry and clothing center were organized to begin welcoming neighbors to the church. When I arrived, the congregation was about half the size it had been in the 1940s and 1950s, but it knew that its survival depended on mission to the neighborhood. Jeremiah said the same thing a long time ago to the exiles in Babylon: "Pray for the city, for in its welfare is your welfare." [Jason Byassee writes in this issue](#) about five Chicago churches that, each in its own way, are doing important urban ministry—which someone once described as "Keeping alive the rumor that there is a God."

One of the ways my church keeps the rumor alive is by being a worshipping, serving community with its doors open to the city. On Ash Wednesday, which this year came about as early as it can ever come, it was snowing in Chicago. By late afternoon several inches of slush had accumulated. Flooded intersections were virtually impassable for pedestrians. Offices sent employees home early. At 3:30 we told

everyone in the building to start for home and to drive carefully. It was suggested that we cancel the evening service, but we decided to carry on. We had never canceled a service because of the weather before. We decided to open the doors and see who would show up.

About 200 people attended—many more than I had expected. I was surprised and pleased to see that the choir members were all there. The sanctuary seemed particularly warm and welcoming against the storm. I did not recognize half the people there. Perhaps some of them just wanted to get out of the snow. But for others, I could tell, this worship experience was as necessary to their lives as it was to mine.

The woman sitting directly in front of me wore a stylish business suit and carried a briefcase and laptop. She knew the hymns, and she walked forward for communion and to receive the ashes and hear the Ash Wednesday words that you are unlikely to hear outside a church: “You are dust and to dust you will return.”

Those words, the lights of the sanctuary amid the storm, the door opened wide to people I didn’t know who had come to church on a blustery Wednesday evening—all this filled me with gratitude for a city church.