

Free-wheel offering: A congregation's bike ministry

by [Elaine Blanchard](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

Anthony Siracusa came to First Congregational UCC in Memphis in 2002. A legally emancipated 17-year-old and a high-school dropout, he came with sadness and anger but also with ideas and hope. He was living in an anarchist commune and working as an apprentice at a local bike shop. He had heard that First Congregational had space to share.

“Can I use some space in this old building to set up a bike shop?” he asked Cheryl Cornish, the church’s pastor, and Julia Hicks, its director of mission. “I’m imagining a place where neighborhood kids can bring their bikes for repairs, learn how to be bike mechanics and recycle old bikes back into the community.” Cornish and Hicks agreed to the plan.

Inspired by Bikes Not Bombs in Boston—one of several nonprofit bike shops and cycling organizations around the country—Siracusa started a shop called Revolutions in a church building. He saw cycling as a way to bring diverse people together, improve the environment and to encourage physical fitness. He also thought opening a repair shop would give kids a place to belong. Siracusa imagined Revolutions, First Congregational provided the space, and both found themselves transformed.

Siracusa brought in tools and parts, and he sent out a word-of-mouth invitation through neighborhood children. Then he opened the doors, and the place filled with kids. Siracusa was at the shop four days a week, and he quickly became a local hero. He called running the shop “an exhausting experience of productive chaos.”

Revolutions began to thrive, and the church council decided to make Anthony’s bike shop an official church ministry. But the ministry faced setbacks. The shop was broken into and robbed four times within a few months, and each robbery made it more difficult to continue the ministry. Siracusa began living above the bike shop, an arrangement that provided security for the shop and gave him a place to live.

Meanwhile, he'd begun a series of weekly conversations with Cornish. He calls her "the mentor I had always needed. No one had ever given me *time* the way she did."

Cornish encouraged Siracusa to attend Sunday worship. He wasn't interested—he wondered why a group of well-meaning people was spending \$800,000 to renovate a sanctuary. "People in this neighborhood need food more than they need a place to get together and sing hymns," he pointed out. And just think how many kids could have a new bike with that amount of money?

The conversations continued, however, and one day Cornish told Siracusa that she planned to talk about him and *Revolutions* in that week's sermon. "Come join us," she said, "and I'll introduce you to some people who haven't met you. It would be good for you to know what this congregation is about."

That Sunday Siracusa overslept. Suddenly hearing the organ music, he pulled a t-shirt over his head and ran downstairs in time to catch the second half of the sermon. "Our church is a body, people who take care of their own," Cornish was saying. "We support one another, and that creates a healthy body—a body with abundant gifts to share throughout the surrounding community." Siracusa began to see that he was living the truth of her words.

He decided to give the church a chance. He attended weekly potlucks, helped lead youth-group meetings, gave building tours to visitors and joined the music program. He got involved with the Freedom Journey Project, a civil-rights-history immersion program, and he met regularly with the mission council. Around that time a church group that had been meeting to discuss simple living took a big step: college professors, computer programmers, social workers and public school administrators sold their homes and moved into the church's north building to live in community. Siracusa had company, with all the challenges and work involved with communal living.

The church had become Siracusa's life, and its conflicts and blessings added to what he was learning in his conversations with Cornish. She suggested that he get his GED and apply for admission to a local college. He applied to Rhodes College and was shocked when he was accepted.

Siracusa recently graduated from Rhodes with honors, majoring in African-American studies and history. At school he developed an interest in social movements and how to organize, sustain and manage them. He won the Vanderhaar Student Peace

Award for his community work at Revolutions. Siracusa has also been awarded a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship, which is allowing him to spend a year traveling over four continents, studying bicycling communities. He wants to learn how the bicycle can be a catalyst for building healthy communities.

Siracusa calls his work providing affordable bicycles for kids a kind of radical reciprocity. “Generous giving is a challenge; receiving out of life’s abundance is also a challenge. Giving and receiving freely—it’s the way we all grow together into the best self, the best community, we can be.”

Revolutions is now run by Kyle Wagenschutz, and Siracusa is proud of the smooth transition—the shop is well organized and has more staff and more young people involved. Last year the church was able to give 50 bikes to students at Orleans Elementary, a school in a low-income neighborhood. Some students received bikes as an award for perfect attendance, others for improvement in their grades. Others were given a bike because they had showed compassion.

Though Siracusa himself has moved on, First Congregational will continue to provide bicycles for children in the neighborhood and at Orleans. “I needed a place to belong,” he says, looking back at why he came to the church. “Growing into my life with this church, I have found a life that matters.”