

The descending ladder: An interview with Gordon Cosby

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

After serving as a chaplain in World War II, Gordon Cosby wanted to create a church that helped people truly become disciples of Christ. Since the 1940s, the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., has called people to spiritual discipline and to social mission. Though never large in numbers, the church has had a large ecumenical impact because of its emphasis on small groups, personal accountability and the ministry of the laity. Over the years the church has spun off dozens of outreach ministries and a network of house churches. Cosby officially retired as pastor in December 2008 at age 91, but his ministry continues.

How did your experience in World War II change your idea of ministry?

In the war I got to know evil in another dimension and what God is like when God is committed to overcoming evil. When you spend your time with thousands of men who are dying, you change a lot of your concepts. It didn't make any difference whether a person was Southern Baptist or Presbyterian or what have you. He was a human being. And where was he going, if there was anywhere for him to go?

I had to think about those ultimate issues in a way that I hadn't before. When you experience two and a half years living on the brink, not knowing if you yourself are going to live and knowing that thousands of others won't, you change if you have any sense left.

What happened when you came home?

I wrote to a few pulpit committees asking for an interview so that I could get back into the denomination. I was a Southern Baptist in those days. After I had four or five interviews, I could tell what they were looking for—and they could tell that I was not it. They had only barely tolerated me before I left.

I said, "God, I still feel called to being a minister of your good news, wherever that may be, but no one in my established community wants me." With a few friends and

with my wife I raised the possibility of starting a new church. Even overseas I had written to my wife about whether she would be open to starting a new church if we couldn't get back with the denomination and if that's what God wanted me to do.

What is the problem with churches in the U.S.?

We've failed to take seriously the questions: What did Jesus want of us? What did he tell us to do? When people express interest in what we are doing here in Adams-Morgan, we ask them if they are ready to become the Way, the Truth and the Life, as Jesus was. Are you ready to embody what he embodied?

How do we move in that direction?

We must die to our own egos and open up to a new reality. That new being is what Christ was after. He wanted me to be a new being. He wanted the old self, the old ego, to die. God wants all of us to move into that new being of love for which we were created. Therefore, personally, I should be moving into love and embodying love.

Not just doing loving things, but becoming love. That's what it means to surrender, to give one's life to God—who is love—to the one who planted the seed of His/Her own being in our deepest being.

God stands at the door of our being, wanting to come in. God doesn't come in until we open the door. God stands at the door of our lives, through our whole lives. I am to become love, and stand at the door of people's lives, with my community.

Christ didn't go up the ladder of success. He went down. It is a descending ladder. Real life is in that descending.

We are called to change the way the world works. We are to resist the system and work toward "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Does it seem strange to leave the Church of the Savior after so many years?

It doesn't seem strange because the church has been changing its form every year since 1946. Every growing organism changes its form constantly.

I would say now that we waited too long to fundamentally change our form at the early stages. We grew to be 130 people at our largest point, and if we had seen what we see now, we would not have grown to be that large.

In 1994 we had to decide whether we were going to legally close down as a working church and let the groups that had grown out of the Church of the Savior be the way that the Church of the Savior continued. I felt very strongly that we would do much more good for the kingdom of God by not trying to formally continue, but it took a long time for everyone to come to that conclusion.