

Taking risks to heal hurt

It's a church—and a yoga studio, psychotherapist's office, and Reiki healing space.

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

"Where does it hurt?" Civil rights activist Ruby Sales learned to ask this question when she was part of traumatic events during the civil rights movement. Years later, she continues to ask it as a social activist. The question inspired Beth Scibienski. In fact, Scibienski started to understand it as the question that the church should be asking about our culture. As a pastor, the question became a driving force for her public theology and practice.

Scibienski walked through her church's neighborhood and asked, "Where does it hurt?" This led her to other questions. "What is our church's Christian work? What is God calling us to do in the world? What does the community need? What can we fulfill?" She invited her whole congregation to begin asking and listening.

The congregation at Grace Presbyterian Church in Kendall Park, New Jersey, is small and vibrant. Just over a hundred members are on the rolls, and most of the people who attend are between the ages of 26 and 44. In many ways, Scibienski and the congregation reflect the best of Generation X's entrepreneurial spirit. When one of their renters moved out of the building and the church suddenly had empty rooms, they saw an opportunity. They imagined that the space could be another door through which they could connect with and minister to people in their community. They began to understand it as a place where they could allow God to heal some of those hurts.

As the people at Grace Presbyterian worked toward a robust public theology, identifying the wounds of the culture and needs of the community, the form of their expanded ministry began to take shape. Scibienski realized that many people in her congregation were engaged in healing arts, so she gathered eight of them around a table, and they began to brainstorm. Eventually they constructed a business plan, compiling demographic information, examining market research, and thinking about

the people they wanted to serve. Then they crafted the mission statement, planned the marketing, and projected the finances.

Through prayer and conversations, they discerned that they wanted to provide programs and services that enhanced mind, body, and spirit. They would build collaborative relationships with individual practitioners, organizations, and businesses by talking with psychotherapists, massage therapists, Reiki healers, and others. They'd involve those who led yoga classes, healing circles, meditation, spiritual direction groups, bereavement conversations, and drum circles. They dreamed of hosting concerts, open mic nights, and workshops. They imagined theater groups for children with autism and sports camps for people with disabilities.

One thing they didn't want, however, was a high-end meditation center that would only be accessible to wealthy clients. Instead they were determined to reach out to those who were underserved and overlooked.

The dream became almost a part-time job for the eight people who had gathered around the table. Three years ago they opened the Sand Hills Community Wellness Center. They refurbished administrative rooms into a yoga studio, a psychotherapist's office, and a space for Reiki healing. They use their green space for a community garden and partner with the community kitchen. They provide classes on how to cook healthy foods and serve community meals. They partner with a creative writing group and host a journaling women's retreat that helps women get past anxiety so that they might live creatively.

Most of the practitioners and counselors are not from the congregation, but they commit to Grace Presbyterian's vision of the Wellness Center. The practitioners have low overhead, and they in turn invest in the community through donated work, sliding pay scales, and program scholarships.

Scibienski admits that creating the Wellness Center has not been easy and says it can't be the last-ditch effort of a dying congregation because it takes more energy than a fading congregation can muster. Scibienski confides, "This is really scary work. I was trained in one vocation, so why do I think I can be a business owner? I feel vulnerable." She realizes that her worshiping community looks nothing like the congregation of her childhood. Reflecting on the ideal church of the 1980s, she admits that "I had to accept that loss."

Yet when Scibienski doubts or gets nervous, she remembers that the church has a long history of starting hospitals and schools. She imagines that congregations must have overcome similar worries when they started their preschools, but running a preschool in a church is now common. “We want to provide positive things in the world,” she says.

The difficulties and bumps in developing the church and the Wellness Center have not stopped Scibienski from imagining other possibilities. Now she dreams of providing housing for families with disabilities and seniors. Clearly, Scibienski is still asking, “Where does it hurt?” She is still listening for the answer, and she is still longing for God to use her as a force for healing.

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