

Shared space, shared vision

In Asheville, one church was dying while another was being born.

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue



Children from Land of the Sky United Church of Christ in Asheville, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Land of the Sky UCC.

Land of the Sky is a church that has taken root in Asheville, North Carolina, over the past seven years. Although it's a United Church of Christ congregation, the church found a surprising partner in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The relationship between the UCC church plant and the Presbytery of Western North Carolina began when pastors Sara Wilcox and Amanda Hendler-Voss realized they needed a worship space for their new church. While many churches begin in coffee-houses or living rooms, Wilcox and Hendler-Voss hoped to grow quickly and needed a larger space for their vision. They wanted plenty of children, so they imagined that

the best space for their community would be a church building. The pastors talked with Pete Peery, a pastor who knew of a struggling Presbyterian congregation that needed renters. The conversation led to a partnership between the UCC ministers and the PCUSA denomination.

Land of the Sky began worshiping in rented space at Westminster Presbyterian Church, and the members there welcomed them. “They wanted to see us grow and have more people,” Wilcox said. The Westminster congregation’s longing for the new church to succeed seemed to go beyond a simple landlord and renter’s agreement. The Westminster congregation was aging and members had discussed closing. Yet they now imagined their building used in the future as a space for Christian ministry and believed that their property and their own commitment to loving God and neighbor would thrive through Land of the Sky.

Wilcox explained that her relationships with the presbytery continued through friendships and cohort groups. When those friends were active in the presbytery, they shared the story of Land of the Sky and became advocates for the new church. When the host church finally closed, Land of the Sky and the denomination worked together on a mutually beneficial agreement to transfer property.

Wilcox thinks that the ease of the relationship was due in part to the similar missions and theologies of the two denominations. In many ways, Land of the Sky is a traditional congregation. Its pastors, however, have skills in reaching out to people who have not always gone to church. Often that means taking part in an ongoing translation process. Instead of naming the church with a number or a theological term, the pastors chose Land of the Sky—a poetic description from a romance novel that talked about Asheville as “the land of the sky.”

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Land of the Sky offers Reformed worship, but the pastors adjust much of the language so that children and adults who haven’t attended church do not feel like outsiders. For instance, the church has a *blessing* instead of a *benediction*, *songs* instead of *hymns*, and a *message* instead of a *sermon*. While the church is liturgical, the words are more contextual. Likewise, worship planners do not use the organ but choose music in a style that reflects their region, using guitars, piano, and banjo, and music that adapts secular music and bluegrass melodies.

In addition, the congregation is committed to intergenerational ministry. Wilcox and Hendler-Voss make sure that parents are not afraid to take their children to church. The members intentionally welcome the children in the service. While the pastors are willing to create rituals that engage children on a deep level, they don't see the worship service as an exercise in child management. They discourage the dirty looks that parents often get—and which make many parents want to leave a church and never come back. Once a child is in the second grade, the child stays in worship. Kids participate by ringing a singing bowl, joining in the children's sermons, and using the resources in children's worship bags. The kids sometimes are noisy, and some people have left the church because they're uncomfortable with the noise level. Yet for Wilcox and Hendler-Voss, the work of treating children as full members of the congregation is not negotiable. They put a great deal of time into Godly Play and invest in child care for every event. It works. Many of the 150 people who attend the church are children.

Wilcox says that the transfer of property will be an important dimension of church life. "There are a ton of church properties that are empty. And there is a ton of need in the world. If these churches were organized for good, justice, and peace, it would be a huge benefit to the world," she said. She also warns, "If we only think in our own silos, we'll be selling ourselves short."

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