

# Church Multiplication

## *Congregations Starting Congregations*

ANTHONY B. ROBINSON



**I**N THE FIRST SEVERAL DECADES of the twentieth century, Plymouth Church in Seattle played a role that many “downtown, first churches,” have played in their history. We were a mother church, supporting and spawning new churches throughout the Seattle area. In 1999, I asked the congregation if that might be a role and ministry we could renew in a new way in this new time. The answer was, “Yes!” and the result is Bethany United Church of Christ, an intentionally multiracial, multicultural congregation and new church in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of South Seattle.

How and why was this ministry of starting new congregations renewed? Let’s start with the “Why?” Three reasons: For years, the Beacon Avenue United Church of Christ had carried on an important ministry on Beacon Hill. But the membership had become so elderly and small that they knew they could not go on. Would the United Church of Christ no longer have a church on Beacon Hill, Seattle’s most racially and culturally diverse neighborhood? Would another United Church congregation close its doors in South Seattle, reducing the number of UCC churches to one, and that one a yoked congregation with the Church of the Brethren?

Meanwhile, Plymouth Church had been blessed in two ways. The nineties saw our endowment grow significantly, strengthening our overall financial resources for ministry and mission. Moreover, modest membership growth and significant participation growth meant that our existing building and parking were overflowing. We had financial resources, but we had maxed out our own growth capacity. How to use these resources responsibly? How to grow, given the limits of our downtown footprint and parking? One answer (not the only one) was to renew a ministry Plymouth had done

well earlier in the century, that of starting new congregations.

How have we gone about it? The first step, taken in the spring of 1999, was to form a negotiating team made up of members of the Beacon Avenue Church and of Plymouth. Together, we agreed on our shared goal: a viable and vital United Church of Christ congregation on the corner of Beacon and Graham in South Seattle. We developed a proposal for a new church start on the existing site that was taken to the congregations of Beacon Avenue UCC, Plymouth, and to the Board of Directors of the Washington-North Idaho Conference.

The proposal called for the Beacon Avenue congregation to conclude its ministry, celebrating that great story of faith and service. They would deed the buildings and land to the Conference. The Conference would lease (\$1 a year for five years, renewable for another five years) the facility back to a new Governing Board for a new church, Bethany United Church of Christ. (Why “Bethany?” The village of Bethany is, you’ll recall, where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead!) The new Governing Board would consist of six members of Plymouth, two members of the former Beacon Avenue Church, one person from the Conference, and the new pastor of Bethany.

It has been important to honor the past, but also to allow the past to be past. In order to see the new thing that God is doing, we needed to “cease to remember the former things,” as Isaiah put it. Beacon Avenue’s history and ministry were celebrated in March 2000. A new beginning was planned, and a church, Bethany UCC, opened, on the first Sunday of Advent in December 2000. Over the summer, a new pastor, the Rev. Angela L. Ying, had been called. She began work in October.

Now, one year into the new church start, Bethany has welcomed eighty members and averages a hundred persons in worship. They enjoy a vital worship life, one feature of which is great diversity in music. Bethany members have assumed leadership roles in the new church. As 2002 begins, the Governing Board has been restructured. It is now made up of nine Bethany members, two Plymouth members, one person from the Conference, and the Bethany pastor. Plymouth's role has changed from one of "leadership" to "consultation." We continue to be a significant financial partner, supporting Bethany with \$45,000 in 2002, as we also did in 2001. We expect to continue as partners for the first five years of Bethany's life and then to review where we are at that point.

What are some of the factors that have been important to Bethany's success? They are

- the willingness of Beacon Avenue members to allow God to do a new thing and to support new directions
- the support of the Conference for a new model of church start
- the participation and counsel of the Local Church Ministries staff

- the eagerness of Plymouth members to share the resources and leadership gifts God has given them
- the groundwork during 1999 and 2000 to prepare for a genuine new beginning and not just another attempt to renew what had once been
- a new pastor, who brought great energy, dedication, fresh vision, and a commitment to a multi-cultural, multiracial congregation in a neighborhood that allowed and required such a vision
- and, most of all, the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit

At this point, Bethany—a little over one year old—has only just begun. For all that we are and do, we depend on God's grace and direction. We understand that much remains to be done if this new church is to succeed. We are grateful to Local Church Ministries for their interest and partnership in this venture and hope that it may provide a model for other larger congregations who feel called to grow and serve in new ways. It has been a great experience for all of us.



For additional information, please contact:  
Anthony B. Robinson  
Senior Minister  
Plymouth Church  
1217 6th Ave  
Seattle WA 98101  
Phone: 206.622.4865  
E-mail: [plymouth@halcyon.com](mailto:plymouth@halcyon.com)

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