

Our Field on Springfield
First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana
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Janet Elaine Rasmussen

A farmer went out to sow. The farmer broadcast the seed widely, but only the seed that fell on good soil yielded a magnificent crop – the hundredfold yield.

God's people strive to be good, fertile soil and to produce a good harvest of faith. The soil is our gathered community. After all, the essence of the church is the corporate body, those who covenant to serve God together as disciples of Jesus Christ.¹ At the same time, the soil is the field or specific locations where a congregation is called to plant and harvest.

Reading the history of First Mennonite Church and other documents has deepened my appreciation for our field here on Springfield Avenue.

Some fairly dramatic happenings reinforce the understanding that this, indeed, is where we have been called to provide a visible peace church witness in Champaign-Urbana.

Did you know that for all but the first two years of our existence, FMC has been worshipping on this same city block?

For 27 years, from 1966 through 1992, our home was the church on the opposite end of the block – 912 W. Springfield.

Then on a December Sunday in 1992, while snow was falling, the congregation processed with Bibles and hymnals down the sidewalk and into this building at 902 W. Springfield, to continue worship. The procession made the News Gazette, as you'll see on the historical time line in the hallway. The newspaper photo shows a young Daniel Fros leading the way with his dad.

For more than fifteen years now, the busy intersection of Springfield and Lincoln has been our church home.

Curiously, or serendipitously, both the initial move onto Springfield Avenue and the one down the block involved our collaborating with, and following after, the Free Methodists.

The empty lot that carries the address 908 Springfield was purchased while we were in the other church. It had a house on it then, which served FMC as office space. At the time of our 25th anniversary, the mortgage on this secondary property was paid off.

The church building at 912 was sold to the Assemblies of God in 1991, but First Mennonite retained the next-door lot.

¹ Pastor Cindy presented a fine overview of our congregational dynamics in her "Ten Consistencies" sermon last week (July 27, 2008).

The one piece of property we haven't owned, until now, is the apartment building. It has been in our sights for a long time, however. In fact, the August 1991 Pastor's Report by retiring pastor David Habegger included the following observation as part of the discussion of the move to our present church building: "The next step for the church will be to decide when is the opportune time to purchase the apartment building. May God give wisdom to the council and to church as that discernment is made."

Here it is, August 2008; seventeen years have passed and the opportune time did indeed come. Praise the Lord!

Now, the story of discerning our field hasn't been quite as straightforward as this simple narrative would suggest. Twice, extensive study and discernment processes almost led us away from Springfield Avenue.

When the 912 W. Springfield building had grown too cramped, the congregation directed a committee to locate an appropriate building site. A four-acre property was purchased on Mattis Avenue in early 1990. A short-term fund drive raised \$80,000. Architectural consultations took place, plans were drawn up, the site readied, even a sign erected "Future site of First Mennonite Church." But these plans changed when the Free Methodists approached our congregation about a swap –the Mattis Avenue building site for this church building. It was a dramatic change in direction and caused considerable disappointment for some members. Other members were thrilled.

The freedom from debt, capital fund raising, and construction oversight constituted real benefits for the congregation. By February 1993, when the move from 912 to 902 W. Springfield had been accomplished, an article in the Illinois Mennonite Conference newsletter about the move characterized FMC as "a satisfied body of Christ with a feeling of unanimity."

A decade later, when this present building was deemed too limited for our program vision, an *ad hoc* space needs committee was formed. This committee worked diligently for fifteen months and delivered its final report in January 2006. Weighing all the data and possibilities, the committee recommended that we sell this church building and buy an existing church with adequate space for both programs and parking.

Yet here we are today, a couple of years later, owning for the first time *three* parcels of land fronting Springfield Avenue!

Again, the congregation studied and discerned. Again, relocation seemed desirable. Again, an offer came to us. Again, we found ourselves recommitting to this familiar patch of urban soil. The 99% affirmation vote for the apartment building purchase and the very generous response to the Close the Gap fund drive are telling signs of the breadth and depth of this commitment. Once again, the Spirit has been at work, prompting an intentional reclaiming of our field on Springfield.

Coincidentally, the decision to move to 902 rather than build on Mattis Avenue was made in May 1991, just after Larry Wilson was called as pastor, and the decision to purchase the apartment building was made in May/June 2008, just after I arrived as your pastor.

This timing offers us the welcome opportunity to discern together, in the Spirit, specific promising outreach opportunities—the harvest possible in our expanded good soil.

Pastor David Habegger made a similar point in August 1991: “We have moved deliberately in making the decision and now the goal should be to develop the kind of ministries that will make good use of the larger facilities. New visions can come as we wait upon the Spirit to guide and direct us. I am confident that God will be working through the church to make a significant witness.”

An appropriate Biblical grounding for conceptualizing our outreach witness can be found in Jeremiah, chapter 29.

When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 597 BCE, a number of Jews were deported to Babylon. The exile was viewed as a disaster, the cause for great lamentation. Psalm 137 captures the mood:

By the waters of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormenters asked for mirth, saying
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the LORD’S song in a foreign land?

Into this misfortune and estrangement, the prophet Jeremiah sends a word from the LORD. He writes a letter to the exiles, explaining how they are to live. The message emphasizes social responsibility, long-term investment, prayerful concern for enemies, and peace.

Jeremiah’s message countered the quick-fix attitudes of the false prophets of the day, who advocated armed unrest and a swift return to Judah. Indeed, that was not to be. After the Babylonian exile, with simultaneous migrations to Egypt, and the destruction of the Temple and city soon after, “a significant proportion of Jews would be living outside the promised land, without king, Temple, or priesthood.” (Oxford Bible, 514 essays).

Listen again to Jeremiah’s letter: Verse 5: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.” In verse 6, we hear that the exiles are to marry and have children, to invest in future generations who will grow up in the strange land. Then in verse 7: “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Where the translation says “welfare” the Hebrew text says “shalom.” Three times, “shalom.” Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you. Pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in the city’s *shalom*, you will find your *shalom*.

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder has written about this stance as the “Jeremianic model.” He links it to the God’s good project of diversity and interprets the dispersion and this nonviolent stance as a “resident alien” calling. Yoder finds congruence with the teaching of Jesus and the early church.²

In an admirable book, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (2002), pastor Mark Gornik also lingers over Jeremiah’s message, which he says “provides continued direction for the church’s urban identity and responsibility.” Gornik identifies the peacemaking “contours” of “presence, prayer, and public activity.”³ This is faithful engagement – it is church as *healing community*, church as *healer of community*, and church as *organizer for more just community*.⁴

Reading Gornik, I am reminded of our own FMC mission statement: as followers of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to become a community through which God’s healing and hope can flow to the world.

What do we need to know in order to discern together how to be such a community, here in this place? Not in Goshen or Newton or Chicago or East Bend, but here in Champaign-Urbana in this particular neighborhood, where God has planted us.

A bit of research has given me an overview of the changes that have taken place on the 900 block of Springfield since we arrived in 1966. Then there were two apartment buildings; now there are four. Then there were five single-family homes and a beauty shop; now there are none. Then the population was 31; now it has more than doubled. Then the university stopped around Springfield; now it extends up to University. Then the directory names were mainly European; now they are globally diverse. Then there was no Mosque on Lincoln Avenue; now we can see the Mosque from our church and claim a meaningful relationship with its leaders. .

In 1969, the US was embroiled in Vietnam and student interest in waging peace was high. In 2008, the US is embroiled in Iraq and student interest in peace and justice is high. Given this and other social and demographic data, what may be some possibilities for us to consider as we act now with the long-term in view?

FMC has been involved with student and volunteer housing before, namely the Voluntary Service Unit residences and Menno House.⁵ What if we developed a Peace House next door, with intentional interfaith community? Our green space has been resting fallow for a long time. What about a community garden? Or, an idea that has been stirring in me this summer, a mowed labyrinth offering an almost year-round venue for practicing spiritual peace? Whatever we decide in the first instance, I pray that we will act out of a

² John Howard Yoder, “See How They Go With Their Face to the Sun” in his *For The Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

³ Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 103.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ *First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana: A 25 Year History* (Urbana, IL: 1989), p. 62; 66.

robust peace and justice witness, seeking the shalom on the city, and that we will draw on our unique and precious family neighborhood ties with the good folks at the Mosque.

Ours is a good field here on Springfield. This is good soil for the hundredfold yield. And as the apostle Paul writes (2 Cor 9:10): “God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.” May God bless our sowing and our harvest, now and forevermore.