

Church of the Reconciler: Our Story

Who We Are

Church of the Reconciler is a multicultural, multiracial United Methodist Church in downtown Birmingham, Alabama. We started in June 1993, and in 1995 we were chartered in the Birmingham-East District of the North Alabama Conference. Our vision was to stay in the city and maintain a commitment to a racially inclusive witness, proclaiming radical hospitality, an unguarded gospel, and a common meal that together would overcome issues of privilege and race. We soon discovered that race and poverty were deeply connected, and the principles we committed to because of racial issues met deep needs in the homeless community and with the working poor. As one homeless man told us, "I was treated as a human being for the first time in years, and it built a chain of joy in my life that I haven't known for a long time." The common meal became food for the hungry. Class, not race, became the overriding issue. Because we welcomed the homeless, we received community opposition, and middle class people — both white and black — stayed away. But we stayed true to our calling, and by the grace of God, in time we were successful in building a church that became a congregation in ministry with the poor and marginalized as well as middle class people (black and white) who love Jesus enough to be part of an urban mission congregation that is multicultural and multiracial.

What We Have Accomplished

Church of the Reconciler was started as a church that is intentionally multicultural and multiracial. We envisioned a church that was open to 'church alumni' who had become disillusioned with the institutional church. We felt called to open the doors with acceptance to all, while we challenged and nurtured our members in their spiritual growth and call to serve.

As a result of that call, we have been and remain committed to a ministry of radical hospitality. We responded to the needs of the homeless community who came to worship with us. And we became known as a church in ministry with the homeless. But that ministry is the *result* of who we are, and a *part* of who we are. It is not the only definition of who we are. Our ministry with the homeless is one facet of the gem that Church of the Reconciler has become.

This church began in a living room, grew to worship in a small rented storefront, doubled the size of that storefront and finally purchased an old warehouse in a nearly forgotten and practically abandoned part of town. We renovated that

warehouse and kept the door wide open in the face of long odds and stiff opposition. And we watched as that previously abandoned neighborhood began to be reclaimed, with Innovation Depot, an award-winning business incubator, across the street, an award-winning green space, Railroad Park, a few blocks away, and now a new baseball park, which is to be built down the street. As it turns out, our building purchase was a wise and profitable investment.

Over the past 18 years, our budget has grown every year. In that time we never missed a rent payment, a mortgage payment, a salary payment, a utility or insurance payment. Until the recent turmoil, we never missed a payment of any kind. No small feat for a church that has always been in ministry to and with the poor, and which has always had to depend on donations from beyond our worshipping community to pay the bills.

Our ministry was healthy and growing in March of this year. We welcomed new members once or twice a month on average. We had an active children's ministry with over 30 children and youth, and a Day Program for the Homeless, which included Bible study, mental health counseling, addiction counseling, and holy communion. We fed the hungry five days a week...over 1000 meals every week. We helped almost 100 formerly homeless people get into permanent housing over the past two years. We offered a clothes closet. We had opened a health center on Sundays and provided a parish nurse during the week. We were about to start building a medical clinic that would provide even more health care support to the homeless community. We had an active UMW chapter that provided meals and support to women in our community. We were forging new relationships with UAB for mental health and addiction counseling. We had everything in place to start back our Access Transportation ministry that would help the poor and homeless get daily transportation to the many service agencies in the Birmingham area. We had plans for installing showers for the Day Program participants and an institutional washer and dryer for our clothes closet, and we had raised half the money needed to begin the project. We were investigating the purchase of a building next door so we could better serve our children and the rest of our community. We had vibrant, inspiring worship celebrations on Sunday with anywhere from 125 to 200 people. We offered several Sunday school classes for adults and communion every Wednesday and Sunday.

Church of the Reconciler has been a consistent leader for the rights of the homeless and fostered the development of the Coalition of the Homeless, advocated for mass transit for all, and was a recognized proponent for social justice within the community. We have also been a promoter of substantial ecumenism in the region.

Our Recent Trauma

Church of the Reconciler has been embroiled in a difficult situation since March 31, 2011, when our pastors were removed from the church without any notice or explanation to members. We were told they were on vacation, which we knew was not true. Almost a week after the removal, the Staff Parish Relations Committee (SPRC) was given a minimal explanation that complaints had been brought against our pastors, but we weren't given specifics as to the complaints, nor were we told who brought them. And we were instructed not to discuss the little we had learned with anyone else. If we did, the credentials of our pastors would be at risk.

And so, the long-time trusted pastors of our church, Lawton and Kevin Higgs, were suddenly and mysteriously removed, we were kept in the dark as to why, and some members knew more than others (but none knew much). Our community includes a large percentage of poor, homeless, unemployed, as well as recovering and not-recovering addicts...in short, people who are not valued or empowered in our society. The resulting leadership vacuum meant that there was a lot of jockeying around among participants who were hoping to improve their 'positions' at the church. With the leadership removed, personal issues between participants were exacerbated. Because we didn't know who was behind these developments, there was speculation, distrust, suspicion, and unfounded accusations against even long-time, trusted members. In short, the church found itself in a deteriorating, downward spiral of division and confusion.

The leadership of the church made repeated efforts to address the issues during this time. We tried to encourage people to keep hope that the Higgs would be restored to our church. We tried to minimize the conflict and remind our members and friends that we are a church of peacemakers. We abided by the outrageous restraints placed upon us, forbidding us to discuss this issue with anyone who wasn't informed by the district superintendent, and forbidding us to be in touch in any way with Lawton and Kevin and their family members. We fielded questions from people in the greater community who wanted to know what was happening and why it was being handled behind closed doors and in secrecy.

Nearly two months after Lawton and Kevin were removed, the church leadership wrote the district superintendent (DS), asking for an update on the investigation. We got a short letter assuring us that the investigation was proceeding under the timetable of the Discipline. As with the meeting to 'inform' the SPRC, no details of any kind were forthcoming.

Some weeks later, we attempted to call a meeting of the SPRC to meet our duties, per the Discipline, of promoting unity in the church. We were forbidden to meet (by the district superintendent).

Several members were concerned about what was happening and the lack of openness in the proceedings. They made attempts to meet with the DS and/or bishop, but the response from the office of the DS was that there was no time to meet with them. One member pointed out that there had been time to hear whatever complaints had been made against our pastors, and she wanted to present her thoughts as well, but she was not granted an audience with the DS. In fact, with the exception of the initial SPRC meeting and an individual meeting with the chair of the finance committee, we are not aware of any member of the church, other than the complaining parties, who was interviewed during the 'investigation' of the complaints.

As the date of Annual Conference approached, we had hopes that our pastors would be reappointed to Church of the Reconciler. After all, we had had no meetings between the SPRC and the DS. Since the Discipline is quite clear about the consultative process that is to precede a change in appointments, we had reason to hope that no changes were imminent.

Then, just days before Annual Conference, the SPRC received an email from the DS, informing us that Kevin was to be reassigned and that Lawton could no longer be connected to our church 'in any capacity.' We were to be appointed a new pastor, and the Conference would take over the church, which would be "governed by a Board of Directors established by the District." Those of us who had served in leadership positions were told we could submit our names "to be considered for a position on the Advisory Board."

There are no words to describe adequately how we felt upon receiving this email. We were shocked that decisions had been made about moving our pastors and assigning a new one without even the appearance of following the consultative process as prescribed by the Discipline. We could not understand why, if no evidence was found that would lead to judicial charges, our beloved pastors were not coming back. After being shut out by the DS throughout the entire process, we were now being informed about the change in pastoral leadership and the takeover of our church *by email!* We were not even granted the respect of a meeting to discuss these changes. And most of us still had no idea what the original complaints were that started this whole mess.

After consulting with an attorney, we challenged the decision for the conference to take over the governance of the church and succeeded in stopping that effort for the moment. As a fully chartered congregation, we run our own church, as other properly chartered United Methodist churches do, and we make our own decisions. But we were left with a church that had been decimated. Worship attendance had dropped by at least half. Participation in meals by the homeless community dropped significantly as well. Loss of leadership meant we had to suspend our children's Sunday school program. The divisiveness and lack of trust that started with the pastors' removal continued even as the lay leadership struggled to bring the church together and articulate our vision as we looked ahead.

Following Annual Conference, our pastors included a senior pastor (retired) who had been assigned as an interim when our pastors were removed, and a new associate pastor. We knew the interim would serve as senior pastor until the end of the summer, when he would leave.

Since there was never any attempt to consult with us, we had not been able to express our support of our pastors. Most members did, indeed, support them despite the handful of people who had registered complaints at the conference level without so much as a hint of raising their concerns to any of the lay leadership in the church. Since there was no attempt to consult with us, we were not able to share with the district superintendent the traits and skills we felt were needed in our pastors, new or old. Since we were ignored every time we tried to meet with the DS, we had no opportunity to share with him what is important to us about our multicultural, multiracial church that is performing a unique ministry in downtown Birmingham. Between the loss of long-term pastoral leadership and the loss of lay leadership because of the controversy, it was critical that we be appointed a pastor with a strong history of social justice work and a deep understanding of our social gospel ministry and practice of radical hospitality. But the district superintendent and bishop didn't recognize the importance of those attributes, and we have spent much of the time with our new pastor explaining who we are and what our vision is and the theology behind the policies and procedures we have in place. Going about the work of healing and growing and continuing our ministry to the least and last – which is difficult at best – has been fraught with roadblocks and confusion.

On March 31, we had three full-time pastors. Now we have one. The bishop and district superintendent chose not to appoint a second pastor upon the departure of our interim. And they did not make provisions for the new pastor to be relocated to Birmingham, which has limited our access to staff resources during a critical time in the life of our church. (Our pastor lives in Hartselle, AL, 70 miles away.)

Loss and Grief

As we struggle to continue our ministry, we are also dealing with serious anger, grief, mistrust, and loss about what has happened to us.

We still do not understand why, upon receiving the complaints, our DS couldn't simply have announced that complaints had been filed at the conference level, and that due to the seriousness of those complaints, they were asking our pastors to take a leave of absence while those complaints were investigated. Such a straightforward, open and honest approach would have enabled us to use valuable energy keeping our ministry on balance instead of trying to figure out what was going on.

We do not understand why the lay leadership of the church: the chair of the board, the lay leader, the chair of finance, and the chair of SPRC were not called on the first day to be briefed on what was happening to our church and our pastors. A Sunday worship celebration and several days of our Day Program for the Homeless were held before any church leadership was informed of developments. Much damage had been done before the SPRC was 'informed' of the complaints.

We do not understand why all who have a stake in this ministry were not permitted to have their say during the investigation. Why were some members invited to talk to the DS and others were shut out? Why were the leadership and SPRC members never given specifics as to what the investigation entailed and what was discovered?

Why, once no evidence was found that would lead to judicial charges, were our beloved pastors not returned to our church?

Why has the DS not taken to task those people who continue to imply that our pastors actually did do something wrong, even though they were cleared and there is no evidence of wrongdoing?

Why were we unable to talk to our pastors, their wives or children, during the investigation, under the threat that their credentials would be removed?

This debacle and the incredibly un-Christian and uncaring way it was handled have damaged our church in ways that may never completely heal.

We have supporters, both individual and institutional, who have withdrawn their support or are considering such a withdrawal because instead of being a church that stands for justice and compassion, we are now a church where a huge injustice has occurred.

Because we are continually having to explain and defend our theology and vision of ministry, many of us no longer feel we are in the same church. One member says she has always seen Reconciler as being her moral center and her compass. For far too many of us, that compass heading has changed, and we are being called to defend that which has always been a given from our earliest days of being called to build this church.

We grieve the loss of our pastors who taught us, led us, learned from us, comforted us, listened to us, supported us, and encouraged us. All churches at some time or other must face a time of transition from trusted clergy to new pastors. But when that transition comes about because of retirement, or a pastor choosing to move on, or a church deciding it is time for a change, the transition, while difficult, is not a tragedy. When clergy are wrongly accused, cleared, and forced to move against their wishes and against the wishes of the church members, it is an injustice and a tragedy. It is harmful and difficult to overcome, to say the least.

We struggle with the loss of trust on so many levels. There is distrust among church members...those who have been hurt and those few who brought the charges...those who have been accused and mistreated during this time and those who brought accusations.

Most importantly, there is a loss of trust between the church members and our district superintendent and bishop. They treated us with disdain and disrespect. They did not include us in this process or listen to us. They did not follow the Discipline. They have called us inept and said in so many words that they feel our lay leadership should be removed, while shutting us down and preventing us from providing leadership when our church most needed it. We have been bullied and treated with arrogance instead of compassion.

We have to ask why these things have happened. Is it because we are a church that practices radical hospitality and challenges our denomination's stand on homosexuality? Is it because we seek to walk in the footsteps of the Prince of Peace and proclaim ourselves to be peacemakers in a community, nation, and world that believe in redemptive violence? Is it because we welcome the homeless and poor into our doors and outside them as well, in an area of the city that is revitalizing and

would prefer to pretend homelessness does not exist? Or is it because we are a poor church?

We find it hard to believe that larger, richer (in money) churches in well-to-do neighborhoods would have been treated so dismissively by conference leadership. We have never heard of such a church having a pastoral change forced upon them with no consideration as to their wishes or what makes them unique.

We can only conclude that this attack has been orchestrated against our church because we are a poor, interracial church in the heart of the deep south. The district superintendent now argues that because Section VII, The Method of Organizing a New Church, paragraph 259, gives the DS the right to designate the method of organization of a mission church upon its establishment, he has the right to change our method of organization now, 16 years after we chartered and six years after being given the mission designation. The DS has consistently refused to engage the congregation on this issue, advising us of his plans through the pastor at an SPRC meeting.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that his refusal to engage our congregation is because many of us are poor and homeless and, in his mind, not worthy of or interested in the fate of our church community. This second-class treatment is a continuation of his consistent refusal to meet with the leadership during the investigation, during the initial appointment process, or during the process when it was decided not to appoint a replacement for the interim pastor.

Now District Superintendent Ron Schultz is working with our new pastor to remove the elected leadership of this local congregation and replace them with a board of directors appointed by the two of them. If they are successful, it is a threat not just to Church of the Reconciler, but to any mission congregation, no matter how long they are established or how successful their ministry.

We are committed to our ministry. We will continue to proclaim good news to the poor, to feed the hungry, to provide a spiritual home to the homeless and help them find physical homes as well. We will continue to welcome the addicted, the prostitutes, the sinners, and help them find recovery and new life. We will continue to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. We will be peace builders and challenge the myth of redemptive violence. We will exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We will continue to practice radical hospitality.

In short, we will continue the ministry we have been called to do for the past 18 years.

And we will continue to seek justice and resist evil. An injustice has occurred, and evil has been permitted to do damage to a unique and dedicated ministry. We cannot stay silent any longer.

This is our story.

We Request an Investigation

We believe that the bishop, Will Willimon, and Ron Schultz, our district superintendent, have violated several provisions of the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church.

When they denied an open and honest investigation of the complaints against our pastors, they denied due process to us as well as to them. The reputations of our pastors, our leaders, and our church have suffered as a result of the way this has been handled. Paragraph 2706.3a states that the Church shall have the right to be heard before any final action is taken. While it is true that there was no judicial proceeding, changes were made as a result of the complaints against our pastor, and we were not heard before the 'just resolution' was announced in public.

They did not follow the consultative process in determining a change to our pastoral leadership. Paragraph 432 makes it clear that "Consultation is not merely notification." We were notified via email that our current pastoral leadership was being changed and a new pastor assigned, with no consultation whatsoever. They did not consult with us at all, as required under Section 433.6 of the Discipline when they removed our pastor or assigned a new pastor to our church.

They have repeatedly tried to remove the current lay leadership and replace us with a Board of Directors appointed by them, in order to have more control over our congregation. Section 249 of the Discipline states that the charge conference shall elect leadership within the church, not the bishop or DS. The District Superintendent has now informed us that he plans to replace the lay leadership of our church without consultation with us and without following the proper proceedings outlined in the Discipline.

Our building was paid for over the years by our members and supporters. Putting the property under the control of a board established solely at the discretion of the

DS, with no accountability to the members, effectively confiscates the property and doesn't follow any procedure established for the management and disposition of church property.

With these actions, the bishop and DS seek to deny our basic rights of leadership and self-determination. They are treating this church with its poor and homeless membership as a second-class member of the UM connection. In effect, they are saying that congregations who are poor and dependent on the support of others do not deserve equal status within the church, not based on the effectiveness of their ministry, but solely on the basis of their financial capacity.

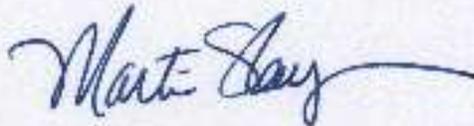
This request for an investigation is not an attempt at retaliation. We find no case in scripture where Jesus sought retaliation, and we seek to follow in the footsteps of the great reconciler. But we also recognize that he never compromised where justice is concerned. Our ability to heal our ministry and grow it again has been severely compromised. We will need restoration and justice in order to reestablish trust and move forward.

We ask for four things:

1. *Restitution in relationship to our finances.* We ask for a long-term, high financial commitment from the North Alabama Conference to Church of the Reconciler to help us recover from the devastation this episode has created in our church and our community. This commitment needs to be made to Reconciler as a full congregation, not as a mission church as defined by Bishop Will Willimon and District Superintendent Ron Schultz.
2. *Appointment of a pastoral team who shares the vision of our congregation and is willing to sacrifice to give leadership to a wounded and fragile community.* We ask to be included in a consultative process as prescribed by the Discipline in order to find a pastor or pastors who are called to lead the church in keeping with our vision of a multicultural, multiracial congregation in downtown Birmingham, with a commitment to nonviolence and social justice for the homeless, the poor, and 'the least of these,' regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation.
3. *Help in the healing process.* The North Alabama Conference should pay for a national church facilitator to come to Birmingham to lead us in a process of restoration and healing as we seek to grow and rebuild. This healing process should include Lawton and Kevin Higgs and their families. While it may not be possible for them to be restored to leadership at Church of the Reconciler, they should be able to work with us in being restored to health.
4. *Clarification of Church of the Reconciler's status as mission congregation.* We are a chartered church which was given mission status in 2005 in response to a change in conference policy on equitable salary. Annual Conference designated Church of the Reconciler as a mission church to address financial

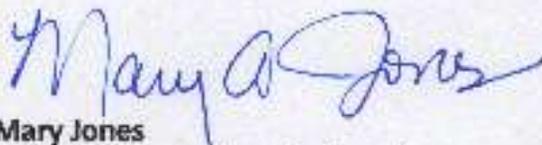
considerations. No one ever suggested that it would involve a change in the church leadership structure or our status as a chartered church. We seek clarification that we will continue to be organized in the manner of a local church and with all the rights and powers of a local church.

The congregation, the homeless community, and the greater social justice community in Birmingham need to see a commitment to this unique ministry and feel the support of the United Methodist Church. We ask for your help.



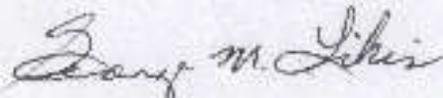
Marti Slay

Founding member; chair, board of stewards



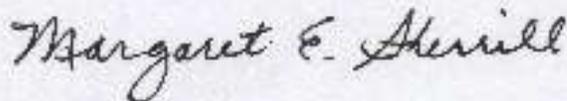
Mary Jones

Founding member; lay leader



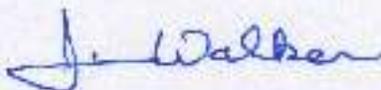
George Likis

Charter affiliate member; chair, finance ministry team



Margaret Sherrill

Charter affiliate member; chair, staff-parish relations committee



Jim Walker

Lay member to annual conference, housing ministry

Church of the Reconciler: Our Story (cont'd)

- Mary Wade, member
Nurse Practitioner @ the
Church of the Reconciler Health Center and Clinic
- Mary Ann Martin, member
Registered Nurse @ the Church of the Reconciler Health Center
- Betty Lewis, affiliate member, Church of the Reconciler
- Glen E. Hood - Trust - Constituent member - Adult
Sunday School Teacher - 7 years, Worship Committee
- Jo M. Fabbini - former youth Coordinator at Reconciler
(for 10 years)
- Al McCallagh, associate member Church of the Reconciler,
Shelter Plus care, Finance Committee,
Birmingham Power Proj, etc
- James G. Boyd, III, associate member (17 years) Church of the Reconciler
Organizer, Birmingham Coalition for the Homeless
- Kay Phillips, President UMW Church of the Reconciler,
attending ten years, member over five yrs.
- Rev. William Ray Wade
- LeeWood Morgan Member, Former coordinator of community service
- Frushard D. Brown Member, housing shepherd.

Church of the Reconciler: Our Story (cont'd)

Oda Wilkerson

Michael Rose

Michael White 16 years

James Hayes 15 years

Toni Williams (12 years)

John M. Brown II (10 yrs) ~~of~~ maintenance
volunteer

WILLIAM PARTEE 12 yrs

Dr. Sis Levin ^{ms} Active participants for 5 years; peace education
counselors

Jenny Levin ^{ms}

Donald Perdue - a member for 12 years, a changed man
because of help from Rev's HIGG'S AND church members
A NOW HAVE MORE THAN HOPE TODAY.

Edwina Sanders 6 years

Mrs. Shontia Funder Braun - 8 years

This church is a blessing for all who enter
(Ministry of Clothing Ministry).

Kevin Hany Michael Col.