A MIND TO GO HOME:

A CONGREGATION HEALED BY FRIENDSHIP & FAITH

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command:

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Galatians 5:14

“My favorite thing about Wesley is the people. They’re very welcoming and genuine. We’re more like a family than anything.”

—Freda Armstrong, Wesley Member, 27 years

“We love each other, we love the Lord, and God has kept us together like a family.”

—Rev. Tiffany Knowlin, Wesley UMC

“During the most pivotal moments in life, such as deep grief, these buildings are full as people come together seeking—and finding—comfort and hope. That’s why they’re important.”

—Rev. Robert Walker, Main Street UMC

“We’re not called to equal giving but we are called to equal sacrifice. And when people believe in something, you can do more than you think you can do.”

—Rev. Tiffany Knowlin, Wesley UMC
Comfort, nourishment, and belonging—elements that bind people to a physical location are foundations of our notions of home. But if a familiar place is lost, can we ever truly return? What does it mean to go home?

This is the question Wesley United Methodist Church in downtown Columbia wrestled with after 2015’s “Thousand Year Flood” exacerbated structural issues, causing their century-old sanctuary’s walls to warp and ceiling to collapse. Over the next three years, this congregation learned that home is not just confined to prebuilt brick walls, but also echoes within the hearts of caring people all around.

Wesley UMC’s history begins in 1869, shortly after the emancipation proclamation. Originally known as the Columbia Mission, it was one of the first independently-founded black congregations in the Midlands. As decades passed, the church honed its ministry by providing both spiritual and
physical nourishment to countless families in neighborhoods near the capitol building. In 1910, the congregation settled into their permanent home - a Gothic Revival style sanctuary designed by well-known local architect Arthur W. Hamby at the corner of Barnwell and Gervais. It was this historic building whose ceiling collapsed on that fateful October day.

Cecily Johnson, now 82, is the oldest surviving member of Wesley’s intergenerational congregation. Born into the church during the 1930s, she has lived through countless social and technological shifts and raised her own family within the close knit Wesley community. “Back in the early days, there were nothing but homes in this part of downtown, and all those families would walk to our church. But now just about all of the houses are gone,” Johnson recalls, her face falling as she traced memories through days long past, back before Columbia was a bustling metropolis full of mobile phones and traffic jams.

“My mother was an active member and we went to church every Sunday. I remember the radiators running during the winter. Playing the pipe organ. And attending Methodist camp. But my favorite moments at Wesley was Vacation Bible School every summer.”

This spirit of true community forged deep roots that enabled the congregation to cling to one another following the ceiling collapse. But like any devastating moment, the aftermath required time for healing and strong leaders to nurture the homeless congregation as they navigated challenges of securing temporary worship space, raising funds to repair damage, and facilitating construction. Wesley’s Reverend Tiffany Knowlin and Reverend Robert Walker, the pastor of the nearby Main Street United Methodist Church, became those leaders.

Like Wesley, Main Street UMC has roots in the mid-1800s and is one of Columbia’s flagship Methodist congregations. “During reconstruction, and on into the early 1900s, Columbia was a densely populated residential city. People walked to church, or rode their buggy if they had one,” said Walker. “By the 1920s, Main Street UMC had roughly 3,000 members. It was a mega church and the largest Methodist church in South Carolina. Today, though, now that people no longer live downtown and due to the tendency for people to worship close to home, we are a much smaller version of ourselves, with less than 100 in attendance each Sunday.”

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With a rich history of ministering to Columbia families, it felt natural for Walker, along with lifelong congregants Mickey Gates and Lucy Lewis, to reach out to Knowlin and offer her congregation a Sunday home in their own historical sanctuary. This newfound partnership required ongoing planning, preparation, and patience as two different congrégations learned to communicate needs and share Sunday space together – Wesley, with their upbeat gospel choir and rambunctious children, and Main Street, with their conservative hymns and older member base.

Once the air of chaos cleared and the displaced congregation began to breathe once more, a new vision arose. It was a vision that inspired all involved – Wesley was going to raise half a million dollars to repair their beloved home on Gervais and infuse life into the building in ways they had never imagined. And it was through the strong support of Main Street that Wesley found the safe space to grow in the present while dreaming of a grand new future.

“Just like in the book of Nehemiah, our people had a mind to work, and they had a mind to return home,” said Knowlin of the fundraising energy that sprang to life in Spring 2017. “We were in an unusual situation which put us in a different mindset that enabled us to truly envision what we wanted, along with a sense of urgency. We also had a team of people who were committed. From our Surge committee in charge of fundraising, to our Study committee that determined the best way to restore our historical home. We had a firm deadline, solid vision and true commitment.”

And committed they were. Wesley’s fundraising efforts began in earnest on July 1, 2017. By the time 2018’s New Year clock chimed, nearly $600,000 had been raised, allowing Wesley to move forward with building restorations debt free.

“It was important that our renovations be driven by ministry,” Knowlin emphasized. “So we had numerous listening sessions, asking people exactly what they wanted so we could connect our vision with concrete, specific goals. And we created this dream together. A fantastic dream that involved more bathrooms, a new sound system, and even state-of-the-art technology. We kept that dream alive, in front of us every single week.”

On Sunday, September 23, 2018, almost three years after Columbia’s historic flood destroyed their sanctuary, Wesley’s dream came to life when God’s goodness and their faith brought them back home. They celebrated their 149th Homecoming inside their beautifully renovated Gervais Street sanctuary. The morning’s sermon? “There’s No Place like Home.”

The two hours flew as words to nourish the spirit, hugs to nourish the heart, and food to nourish the body were shared with all in attendance. But the celebration didn’t stop that day. The following Sunday, as a special thank you, Wesley hosted a breakfast for Main Street worshippers.

“These buildings are sticks, and bricks, and mortar, and glass, but they’re dedicated to the glory of God. If we don’t use them, we are wasting God’s precious resources,” Walker spoke, referencing Main Street’s time sharing their own building. He laid an arm around Knowlin’s shoulders and looked upon both congregations seated beneath Wesley’s restored ceiling. “Wesley has been a blessing to us. You’ve taught us, led us, inspired us, and given us so many gifts of love. We can never thank you enough for the life and energy you brought into our church the past three years. Please come back to visit, because you will always have a home at Main Street.”

There are moments throughout life that threaten to tear apart our foundations and strip us of our homes. And then there are shining reminders, such as in the case of Wesley and Main, that remind us how, through God’s sheltering grace, not only can we find our way back to where we belong, but along our journey we can build surprising new homes with generous, loving people in ways we could have never predicted. ROC