



## **Reviving Old St. Patrick's Church**

by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Jack Wall is a Roman Catholic priest in Chicago. A few years back he was assigned to a church that had been virtually abandoned. It was located in the heart of Chicago with four remaining members. The church was like so many urban churches. Thousands of people pass by each day, but only a handful are left in the worshipping congregation.

The story of Old St. Patrick's renewed life in recent years gives hope to all struggling congregations. Today there is a vital ministry present. Father Wall in a presentation sponsored by the Lilly Endowment laid out his key learnings about congregational renewal based on his experience at Old St. Patrick's.

### ***Mission-Centered Not Member-Centered***

His first lesson was that a congregation must be a mission-centered church, not a member-centered church. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive. He contends that "members" are drawn by mission. Therefore, instead of asking members, "What do you want us to do?," the question is more appropriately one of discerning God's mission for the church to which all commit themselves.

A major focus of the mission discerned for Old St. Patrick's was engaging public life. They sought to initiate the dialogue between faith and life for the community. Their physical location gave them the opportunity to fulfill this mission in ways not available to other congregations.

A United Methodist bishop said recently that in all too many churches a pastor can stay for a number of years with the members feeling wonderful about the tenure. Yet in those years there are no new disciples, study groups, or outreach to the community. Those are member-centered churches that are not mission-centered.

### ***Pastoral Church instead of Ideological Church***

His second point was that a congregation should see itself as a pastoral church and not an ideological church. If mission is the first driver, then connecting with the feeling and needs of the people comes next. The goal is to reach and serve people in the name of Christ. Many of these people will be at different places ideologically. Beginning with a pastoral perspective rather than an ideological litmus test seems important to him.

### ***Church as an Event***

His third lesson has to do with how the church functions, particularly in worship. He says that we need to think of church as event more than a place. This corresponds to what others say about the importance of "experience" for people today.

Related to church as event is the role of hospitality. He wants all the church members to see themselves as "hosts" for the "experience of Old St. Patrick's." Everyone knows what it means to be a host and is capable of hosting if they only come to see themselves as hosts. As with any hosting, the most important person is the stranger, the one who is alone, the one who is trying to find her or his way in a new place. The good hosts are naturally drawn to the strangers in our midst, even as Jesus was.

Old St. Patrick's website - [www.oldstpats.org](http://www.oldstpats.org)