

We Love to Tell the Stories
125 Year of Making God's Love Real

From the Past to the Future
Jim Ferman

I grew up as a member of historic First Methodist Church, in downtown Tampa – the church of my parents and grandparents. I was baptized there and went regularly through high school, MYF, choir, until I left for college.

A plan to demolish the original sanctuary built in 1890, with historic steeple and church architecture was proposed during that time, which proved divisive to the congregation. Those supporting the proposed modern structure, contemporary 60's architecture, prevailed and it was built, but divisions remained for those who were inclined toward historic preservation, including my parents, Martha and Jim Ferman, Sr. That sets the stage for change.

Returning to Tampa from college, military, marriage, and with a new baby, Celia (then a Presbyterian) and I went church shopping and picked the one with the best nursery, staffed by Viola Fleming to whom baby Laura was immediately and firmly attached. That was Hyde Park, and we are here today, and baby Laura is 57 years old.

Ready to separate themselves from the divided atmosphere in the congregation in the “New Downtown Sanctuary,” my parents were eager to follow us and became active and enthusiastic “Hyde Parkers” until their deaths in 2003 and 2011.

With some irony, the First Methodist Church's new campus was met with changing demographics and downtown land use evolution during the decades ahead, with a dwindling congregation the results. Struggles to keep an aging congregation and difficult finances ultimately led to its identity as “First Church” unsustainable in 2011 and it became ours, rechristened as The Portico, and now a vital part of our mission to Make God's Love Real, following the “Cross the River” task force, of which I was a member.

On occasional visits to The Portico campus, I see familiar artifacts, including a plaque listing my father as one serving in WWII, and from my time in its older building as a teenager, site of MYF pancake suppers. Full circle, it seems sometimes.

We've baptized our babies and grandchildren, seen both of our daughters married, buried both my parents and many friends, and been afforded leadership roles on occasion. The Knox Hall hallway photo of me reminds us that 70's hair, glasses, and fashions are best left in the 70's.

In 1994, I was asked to lead the 21st Century Task Force, which developed our current mission and vision statements (attached).

1. Worship – the central act of the church, by which we define ourselves.

2. Christian Education – the process by which we grow in Christian discipleship.
3. Caring Ministries – through the power of our connection in faithful community.
4. Outreach to the City and the World – evangelism, community ministries, global ministries.

How to achieve these goals would require personal leadership and cooperative involvement of clergy and laypersons with multiple skillsets, which spawned the Facilities Task Force, which will be the subject of another contributor.

Perhaps my most successful contribution to that task force was to recruit its leader – Jim Cloar, then the Executive Director of the Tampa Downtown Partnership, who at the time was “kicking the tires” at Hyde Park. Approaching him on a sidewalk by what would become the Memorial Garden, I told him, “You need to join this church so you can chair this committee,” and he did, creating my pinnacle of evangelism!

Looking back on those decades there have been, as in most human endeavors, detours, missteps, revisions, and disappointments, but the strong hand of the Lord’s guidance has kept the direction on course and the continuously evolving challenges and opportunities met with positive energy and results.