



The worship of Lighthouse International Church brings additional life and energy to Southside's campus.



Southside Baptist Church pastor, the Rev. Dr. Tim Kelley, leads Lenten worship.



Intriguing Intersections: Southside Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

Situated prominently in the heart of the Five Points South neighborhood, Southside Baptist Church has been a presence in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, for well over 100 years.

Southside's history, like most traditional Baptist churches, is complicated. In the 1950s, hundreds of children and adults would meet in assembly rooms to sing and pray together before dividing into small Sunday school classes in a sprawling church building big enough to accommodate the masses. Southside was the first church in Alabama to broadcast its services and began doing so in 1950. When the demographics of downtown Birmingham changed in the '70s, some churches relocated to the suburbs, but Southside remained committed to its neighborhood.

Membership has dwindled at Southside over the years following national trends, but the church still has a sprawling campus that has gradually become home to many other groups who serve the neighborhood alongside the congregation.

According to Southside's pastor, Dr. Tim Kelley, Southside dedicated space to a Korean Baptist church around 1982, and the church still meets there today. Then, in the early 1990s Southside Ministries, a cooperative ministry, needed temporary office space while it renovated. Southside Baptist had the space they needed for offices, so they entered into an agreement. Word-of-mouth led other organizations to Southside, and soon they were housing YMCA summer camps and

Leasing Space to Nonprofits
& Other Congregations

other area organizations. Hosting organizations has become more of a necessity over the last couple of decades as the cost of utilities and maintenance has increased but the church's membership, and therefore income, has not.

The church formalized its space partnership process years ago by establishing a committee that vets nonprofits who wish to use the facilities. These organizations must have nonprofit status or be in the process of securing it, have insurance, a constitution and by-laws and a mission statement. The Southside Building Use Committee does not insist that everything line up perfectly with Southside's beliefs. But, each organization using space must exhibit some reflection of Southside's mission. Southside Baptist is committed to the wellness of the whole person, so nonprofits must align with that commitment in some way, which is rarely an issue. Over recent years the church has hosted community nonprofits, a school for critically at-risk youth and adults, feeding ministries, and other organizations providing direct services.

Today, Southside Baptist is home to no less than five Birmingham-area nonprofit organizations and aside

from the congregation's weekly worship service, four other churches gather there on Sundays. This combination makes Southside itself a unique intersection of church and community as it occupies part of a unique intersection within Birmingham.

WHERE COMMUNITY AND CONGREGATION COME TOGETHER

Located in downtown Birmingham with proximity to bus stops and just minutes from major thoroughfares, Southside Baptist Church is an ideal location for organizations that want or need to be downtown but can't necessarily afford the prohibitive price per square foot to rent adequate space for their needs. Southside currently provides space for Collaborative Solutions and its two subsidiary nonprofits, Bridge Ministries, Family Promise and Alabama Possible.

"Years ago, these could have been ministries of the church," Dr. Kelley said. Today, however, with declining membership, they've decided to open their doors to other organizations and churches in the spirit of cooperation rather than having to "own" the ministries themselves. The nonprofits have seen a financial impact in the form of an in-kind gift that makes

square footage affordable downtown, according to Rana Cowan, the director of Family Promise Birmingham. She said that Southside Baptist offers a safer environment for their clients than traditional shelter settings and the church members are welcoming, making it both affordable and pleasant to operate out of the church. Shared spaces like a board room that can be scheduled for use by any group as well as shared resources like a copy machine and internet access, decrease overhead costs and logistical challenges for each partner headquartered in Southside's buildings.

Perhaps the most interesting intersection at Southside is that of the five churches that worship within its walls. The Church at Birmingham, Light House International, the Korean Baptist Church and Iron City Church all worship at Southside on Sundays. Dr. Kelley said that during the morning worship hour you can hear a cacophony of African, Korean and English-speaking praise that is really "quite something." All these congregations are theologically different, but that hasn't been a deal-breaker for the Southside congregation.

"These churches and organizations create energy and life that wouldn't

be here otherwise," Dr. Kelley said. The Rev. Kam Pugh, a pastor of Iron City Church, commented that because their congregation is composed mostly of college students and young families, they have more time than monetary resources to give in this season of their lives.

"Southside Baptist has been so gracious to allow us to minister in the neighborhood the Lord has called us to at a generous rate so that all of our funds for ministry aren't drained on a building. We have also been able to partner together with Southside, who has the longest running food bank in Birmingham, to help meet some of the needs of our community together," Pugh said.

SPEED BUMPS AND SLOW-DOWNS: THE CHALLENGES OF SHARED SPACE

Becoming this unique intersection, however, hasn't been without challenges. Sharing space with others is sometimes inconvenient, especially when one group does not leave things as they have agreed to, and this model of facilities use is not without tension. However, Dr. Kelley notes, no relationships have ended badly thus far. Those who use the church for office and worship space are invited to meet regularly (pre-Covid this was quarterly) to share

updates and maintain a sense of community within the walls of the large facility.

The building-use fee organizations and churches pay to use their space helps Southside keep the doors open and lights on in their expansive buildings, but it doesn't stretch much further than that. The revenue generated by the building-use fee helps the church break-even on utility expenses, which continue to increase with rising rates and older structures. Having a large campus with multiple, aging buildings means there's always something in need of repair. The church chooses generosity over profit, which means "flipping" space for a new partner to occupy or making needed repairs and renovations are all the financial responsibility of the church. In turn, Southside continues to face financial challenges when it comes to maintaining its facility. Some projects may be delayed or take longer to complete and difficult choices about which projects will take priority sometimes have to be made.

GREEN-LIGHTING GENEROUS SPACE SHARING

Like Southside, many churches have ample space that sits empty five or six days of the week. Consider the layout of your church and which

rooms might be completely vacant or rarely used. If these rooms can be converted to office space, the next step is to think about which nonprofits or organizations might need affordable space. Which nonprofits would be a natural fit for your congregation? Family Promise discovered Southside because one of the board members was also a member of the church. If members of your congregation serve on boards or volunteer regularly with area nonprofits, these might be good places to explore first because they're pre-vetted and already share a connection with the church. You might also make a list of nonprofits the church partners with who would benefit from more affordable or adequate space.

You will also need to discuss and decide on the non-negotiables for your congregation in terms of who can use the space. In true Baptist fashion, Southside formed a building use committee that vets all of their partners. How will the church want those who use the building to align with your mission/vision/values? Accountability is important for both the church and the organizations that are housed within it. A building use committee would want to create some version of a contract or agreement that both parties feel provides good

guidelines for the use of the facilities. Knowing what your building costs to operate per square foot and what the average rental rate is for office space in your city/town will be important in helping to determine a rate that is mutually beneficial. It will need to cover the cost of the building usage while also being affordable enough that the nonprofit is getting a tangible benefit over other potential space, especially those properties that might be in a more convenient location.

A building use committee would also need to determine how spaces will be accessed. While some churches have keys, others have moved to keyless entry systems. Nonprofits would need access to the building as well as their clients, and being hospitable and a steward of facilities means making the building accessible. Though sharing space can prove challenging logistically, opening common spaces or resources helps further lift the financial burden of the organizations with whom you partner. Think about sharing internet, copy machine, and other operating costs with nonprofits to save supply costs and maintenance fees. This will add a layer of complexity to the church administrator and/or financial secretary to keep records. Churches might also consider assigning

space and ownership to individual organizations who use the space and assign the cost of renovation to the occupant. If organizations will not be responsible, the church will want to make a commitment to deferred maintenance so that facilities look and feel as hospitable as possible.

The biggest reason for Southside Baptist Church to extend hospitality to so many is that they simply wanted to maximize the space so that it doesn't sit empty and dormant, which they believe is poor stewardship of the expansive facility resources they have. Dr. Kelley quotes a speaker he once heard when he says, "Churches are often closed when people most need them," and Southside wants to be open for social ministries that will provide a tangible difference in the Birmingham community.

While vehicles may be confused by the tricky intersection outside of Southside Baptist Church, the intersection inside is clear: church and community are finding mutually beneficial ways to serve together.