

Blaze

From The Flint

February

2016

First Presbyterian Church Albany, Georgia

Each month, Blaze will highlight a member of Flint River Presbytery in the hope that a greater sense of community will assist all of us in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This month we highlight First Presbyterian Church of Albany, GA.

In 2000 the movie *Gladiator* won the Academy Award for Best Picture. That movie opens with an epic battle scene, as the invading Roman army is set to overrun the last stronghold in Germania. The outnumbered German force defies the Romans, determined to defend their homeland. Quintus, one of the Roman officers, turns to General Maximus and says, "A people should know when they're conquered." Maximus then turns to him and responds, "Would you, Quintus? Would I?"



What in the world does that have to do with First Presbyterian of Albany? Well, if you were to read our church history, you'd be struck by the fact that we voted --not once, but *twice*--on the question of whether or not to leave downtown Albany. You see, there was a time when Albany, like many "downtowns" nationwide, thrived. First benefited greatly from the boom, having almost 1,000 members at one point in the mid-1950s. But then "downtown" stopped being a boon for churches and started being a liability. Businesses left. Many of the higher-income residents left. *Members* left. People joined Quintus in saying, "A people should know when they're conquered." Economic and cultural forces had doomed downtown Albany, so some downtown churches moved to "higher population growth" areas. Many members at First agreed, but not enough. In 1980 the congregation voted on whether or not to relocate from downtown, and the vote failed by 23 votes. In 2004 a motion to merge with another church, and thereby abandon downtown Albany, failed by a mere 9 votes. A slim majority refused to believe that God was done with downtown Albany...or First Presbyterian Church.

Faced with the prospect of closing the church for good, the members moved out into the city, and through serving those outside the church's walls, dynamic pastoral leadership, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are now a growing church with a vibrant ministry in our city. Over the better part of the past decade, we've worked to build coalitions among downtown churches and agencies to address issues of poverty, homelessness, and racial reconciliation.

Our "original" program was feeding homeless folks every month. Our "2nd Saturday Samaritan Mission" still serves a full meal the 2nd Saturday of each month, and a true feast at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The Community Resource, "A Place 4 Hope," grew from the Samaritan Mission. We simply started asking people who attended the meal what they needed most. Their answer: photo IDs, birth certificates, transportation, help with medical expenses, and other related services to help them get back on their feet. A Place 4 Hope operates every Tuesday and Friday morning, next door to the Salvation Army in Albany. In addition to services aimed at helping people get and hold employment, we give away brand new bicycles to anyone who has a job and needs transportation. Our church also provides a large percentage of "Meals on Wheels" volunteers for the downtown area, and is heavily involved in the "Reading and Racquets" program, which tutors students of local schools and gives them tennis lessons as well. All of these programs are grounded in our deep commitment to Christian education. A weekly dinner and Bible study remains one of the central and best-attended fixtures in our church's life. We want to know God's Word, and live it out where we are.

Our mission statement is "Praying to Become God's Hope and Joy."

We never believed that downtown Albany was conquered, or that our church was conquered, either. We believed, and *still* believe, that we exist to bring God's hope and joy to the hurting people and community structures of Albany.



"We can't wait to see what God's going to do through us in the heart of our city!" Rev. Joshua (Josh) Bower
Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Albany, GA

