

Protagonist Corner

Kimberly C. Richter

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville, North Carolina

I am writing this article during my last two weeks as the Associate Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia; I am spending a lot of time musing about the front door. The front door of the church is situated right next to my office so I come and go past it many times in a day. I don't really use it much myself. Just like at home, I use the back door mostly. Most everyone else who comes to Central, however, uses the front door.

The front door is made of glass. That means, of course, that I can see out and others can see in. From the front door of the church, I can see the front steps of our gold-domed State Capitol Building. I can see legislators and public servants as they go to important meetings. They wear nice clothes and carry briefcases and cell phones and are generally in a hurry. In order to look across at this hall of power, I must first look at the crowd of people who gather each day outside of Central Church. A human line of vulnerability and powerlessness takes its stand between the church and the state. These folks wear modest clothes and many of them carry everything they own in a plastic bag. Many of them are men who are new to the city looking for work. Over the past three years, more and more women have been showing up, too, pushing strollers or holding the hands of older children who ought to be in school somewhere. Across the street government officials are passing laws about welfare reform while outside our front door people are lining up for basic necessities of life: food, MARTA tokens, a new pair of shoes, drug or alcohol counseling, clothing referrals, use of a telephone or a toilet, or maybe just a warm cup of coffee and a donut and the chance to have someone listen to their story.

It is important that these guests of our Outreach Center come and go through our front door. It often makes for a chaotic main hallway, but these daily interactions are an important reminder to the whole church staff and congregation about why we are here in this particular place learning to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Sometimes our patience is strained to the limit by the anger or frustration that gets vented our way. Sometimes our beliefs are challenged and deepened by the generous and hopeful spirituality expressed by one who has so little materially. I have learned to despise the arm's-length and dismissive phrase "the less fortunate." There have been times when I have wondered who the less fortunate one is. Some of us, after all, are rich in things and poor in soul.

Children come and go through our front doors everyday. About seventy-five of them—infants through five-year-olds—arrive with their parents for day care in our Child Development Center. We get to see them as they make their tiny way to the playground outside. We watch them grow and take steps ever more sure into a world of diverse splendor. At night when they and their parents leave, they go out the back door. For a few minutes, they share sidewalk space with men who are homeless and have lined up to stay in the Central Night Shelter. I often think of this sidewalk as holy ground in its own way. Here intact families share space with men who are in such a situation at least partially because they have lost family or a sustaining community of support.

Church members also come and go through the front door. On Sundays there are lots of them of all ages. Children come running and laughing and chasing each other into the hallway. Teenagers arrive and quickly find their friends. They are eager to talk since most of them don't go to the same school during the week. Adults of varying ages come in to sit in the nursery or choose one of many adult education classes. There is one group of nonconformists who spend the education hour sitting together in the Fellowship Hall dropping a quarter in a basket for every cup of coffee they drink. They even have a name for themselves, "The Gordon Heath Class" in honor of their founding member.

Some church members come to the church during the week to volunteer in the Outreach Center or Health Center or to assist the church office staff. Others come at night for a meeting or to wash feet in the shelter during the Wednesday night Foot Clinic. Others come to Choir and Bell rehearsals. Every Tuesday morning, one couple in their eighties drives to Central with groceries loaded in their car. They get the church-owned supermarket cart and push it out to their car, then up the sidewalk and through the front door. They bring food for the Outreach Center and catch up with the latest news from the staff. When they leave, they go out the front door arm in arm. Their steps are slow but steady. They have been coming on this day for years and years like Simeon and Anna to the temple. Some of us pause to watch them go, recognizing what a precious sight they are...the embodiment of steadfast love and faithfulness.

Oh, our front door is locked. You can see through it, but to get through it you must ring a bell or be welcomed in by the "Door Person" who greets everyone during the morning hours. It wasn't that way when I came to Central six years ago. The door was unlocked and fully accessible. About three years ago someone came in with the intent to do harm. We had known him for years, but one afternoon he became a stranger to us as he entered silently and swiftly and attacked the office manager as she and I stood talking. In some ways, we have never gotten over having to lock the door, so we still try to be as friendly about it as a locked door can be.

I will miss the front door of Central Presbyterian Church. By the time this comes out in print, I will have opened a new front door at Grace Covenant Church in Asheville, North Carolina. I have learned this much: when you open the door, you never really know just who will come in or what their coming in will mean in ways great and small. It is always a risk. But mostly, it is grace that comes and goes with great frequency and with steadfast faithfulness because, after all, it is God who keeps our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forevermore.