

Unity

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The new congregation is called The Bridge, symbolizing the crossing from hopelessness to hope. It meets in the building of another Methodist congregation off South Tacoma Way that disbanded in 2009.

The symbols of Christmas shine in the church at 5601 S. Puget Sound Ave. A Christmas tree decked out in white lights and ornaments reaches toward the ceiling. A green wreath surrounds purple and pink Advent candles. Red poinsettias sit on the communion table.

Jared Williams, 31, who grew up in St. Paul's Methodist, said there's new life and energy this Christmas at The Bridge, a ministry of the United Methodist Church.

"I'm joyful that we have what we have," Williams said. "Both churches were on the brink of extinction. The fact that we've got this new life is reason to celebrate."

Last Sunday, about 60 people sang Christmas classics such as "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice" and "O Come All Ye Faithful."

During the hourlong service, people greeted one another with handshakes and hugs, and shared prayer requests, joys and announcements.

"We thank you for the birth of the Christ child, which gives us hope for the future," prayed the Rev. Gordy Hutchins, 56, who guided the two congregations through the transition.

Starting with discussions in 2008, the merger was a way for the two congregations to preserve their futures and reach out to another area of Tacoma, the pastor said.

"This is our Advent," Hutchins said in an interview. "It's something new. It's something exciting." "It feels like one big family," said Ernie Boone, 42, who attended Sixth Avenue. "Before, we were all strangers."

The stories of Sixth Avenue and St. Paul's

are similar to those of many dwindling, urban churches in mainline Protestant denominations. Their memberships shrank and aged over decades. Not enough new members joined to halt the downward slide. St. Paul's was founded in 1889; Sunday morning attendance had fallen to about 30

He started going to St. Paul's in 1935. "We had beautiful windows but it needed a lot of work," Lindstrom said. "We didn't have enough money. It would have closed."

Two other United Methodist congregations, Bethany in Tacoma and Parkland, also considered the merger. The four con-

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people. Sixth Avenue was created in 1950; its attendance had declined to about 20. "We were tired. We had no energy," Hutchins said. "The buildings were an albatross. The opportunity to come here gave us a new start."

Hutchins and two part-time lay ministers,

gregations held services together for about a year, forming a cooperative parish. But Bethany and Parkland decided to continue as individual congregations.

Sixth Avenue and St. Paul's merged on March 6. Both gave up their buildings to the regional Methodist conference in a swap for

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Besides donations, its support includes some money from groups that lease the current church and a portion of the lease money from the two previous church buildings.

The congregation has reached out to the community with a Halloween party and Christmas caroling. It operates a part-time coffee shop in the church building, called Holy Grounds, especially for homeless people and others in need. The church is putting on "The Phantom of the Opera" in May for the second straight year. It also partners with a small, independent Orthodox Catholic parish, called His Loving Word, that meets at The Bridge.

Tammy Ansbro, 46, drives from Lacey and brings her 6-year-old granddaughter for the Sunday morning service at The Bridge. It's the first time Ansbro has been part of a church since 2001, when her husband died and she lost her faith.

Her mother and sister-in-law also attend The Bridge.

"Everybody's very friendly," said Ansbro, who started going to The Bridge in July. "I never felt like a stranger."

She said she will worship in her new church tonight and on Sunday, when she'll be one of four new members received.

"I feel like I've reconnected with my God and my faith," Ansbro said. "This Christmas will be in the church."

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