The Divided Church of Hyde Park
By Michael Lipkin

The annual meeting at the United Church of Hyde Park is off to a rocky start. Eating a modest lunch, about 30 active congregants sit at round plastic card tables in the rec room, dressed in their Sunday best. Above their heads are a dozen or so banners with beatitudes in large felt block letters. Bill Bigelow, underneath “Swords to Plowshares,” asks for clarification on voting procedure. The crowd groans—they’ve already answered his question twice in the past few minutes.

The room is tense because up for debate is more than just a committee chairmanship or a report on outreach programs. The church is projected to run a large deficit for the fourth year in a row, a product of all-time low membership. And now there’s a proposal to drastically cut back spending at United—this meeting is the first of several to discuss the church’s strategy for the next decade. What’s at stake is the future of the United Church of Hyde Park.

United sits on the corner of 53rd Street and Blackstone Avenue, one of the oldest buildings in the neighborhood. The church resembles a modest castle, with a large tower and thick grey, stone walls. The steeple faces out into the intersection, flanked by two large stained glass windows. Inside is a grand sanctuary, with Romanesque columns dotting the walls and enough pews to seat 600 people.

United was originally a Presbyterian church chartered by Paul Cornell, the founder of Hyde Park, and has held services for over 150 years. It survived financial and membership crises in 1930 and 1970 by merging with other nearby churches, joining with United Church of Christ and Methodist congregations.

Long-time members are proud that their church is multidenominational and multiethnic—it’s almost exactly split among whites and blacks. But United has the lowest membership of any church in Hyde Park: with only 55 people each Sunday; it has been shrinking and aging steadily over the past five years, and donations haven’t been enough to cover expenses. Even worse, according to a recent report by the church, other churches in Hyde Park report growing or steady congregations with annual budget surpluses. There are so few members at United that nearly half sit on governing committees. It’s been decades since the church’s grand sanctuary was filled.

At the service before the annual meeting, about 40 people were scattered among the pews, never more than three to a row. The sanctuary and the congregation don’t match up. “It’s like a size five foot in a size fifteen shoe,” the church report said.

Each week after his sermon, the pastor calls for the congregation to come to the front of the room. Now shoulder-to-shoulder, the congregants stand among the first few pews, in the aisles, some up by the dais. Everyone links hands and forms two concentric circles. In turn, members voice their personal prayers, for a wife who died Friday, for the people of Egypt in revolt, for victims of the flood in Australia, for a son driving alone to D.C. This “sharing of joys and concerns” has been part of the church’s tradition for over 40 years. Back when there was greater membership it was an impressive sight, with hundreds of people squeezed together. Now it is another reminder that the church needs to change.

The United Church of Hyde Park isn’t alone. Most Americans are members of large “megachurches” with thousands of members: the largest 10 percent of churches garner over half the nation’s religious donations, congregants and staff. Small churches like United are closing not only as large churches spread, but as individual megachurches grow larger. Smaller neighborhood churches across the country, especially Protestant ones like United, are being forced to decide how to stay alive in a culture where celebrity preachers draw congregants from miles around. What kind of services will these churches offer, and how much are they willing to change their decades-long
identities to attract new, young members? This is the story of one church trying to have that conversation.

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Susan VanBemmelen, sitting in the back of the room, raises her hand. She speaks quietly, almost to herself. She’s heard enough about salary cuts or planned cutbacks on outreach—all too abstract for her. What is the church trying to do? Is there any metric to judge its success?

Carol Bradford, the council chair, tries to respond. “We’re a church, not a business,” she says. Look to the church covenant for its mission: to seek the spiritual welfare of its members. “I can’t monetize that.”

VanBemmelen looks for more. But she meanders, her voice dipping low, mumbling about finances and mission statements.

Peter Kohn yells at her from across the room. “What’s your question? I’m confused.” The room agrees. “We all are,” they shout. “We have to approve this budget.”

Public discussions about the future of United can get heated: Pastor Larry Turpin says whoever speaks loudest and angriest usually gets their way. This meeting is particularly tense because of the church’s dwindling reserve funds, a combination of nearly $300,000 in Coke, Pepsi and DuPont stock, and $240,000 recently left to the church in a congregant’s will. But last year the church administrator and her boyfriend, a church janitor, embezzled $50,000, mostly for drugs. Even after its insurance company paid the money back, the church lost $70,000 that year, its third straight annual loss. It’s expected to lose another $40,000 this year.

A smaller membership means fewer donations and fewer hands to volunteer. But the church still sees itself as a large church, with a pastor, assistant pastor, administrative assistant, youth minister, nursery attendant, music director, youth musician and several custodians.

In a letter to the congregation three years ago, member Ted Swain laid out the church’s assets: its members, its location, and “an elegant history studded with luminous names from the past.” But what it needed now was a plan. The alternative, he said, is to start planning for the congregation’s dignified demise. If the church doesn’t stop living beyond its means, he said, “I’m pretty sure some enterprising real estate developer would be happy to relieve us of our problems.”

The recent report that discussed the church’s low membership details one way to bring the church’s budget in line: severe cutbacks. If the committee who wrote it has its way, most of the staff would be let go, leaving just the pastor, secretary, organist, and a custodian, and all only part-time. The cuts seem to make financial sense, but the congregation pushes back. Some don’t believe there’s a problem, but more question why the church is in this position at all. With church membership generally steady in Hyde Park, why is this church having so much difficulty attracting members?

“This report seems to outline what we can do to circle the wagons and kind of maintain things as they are now,” Duone Brown, one of the members in charge of youth ministry, says at a later meeting. “We get smaller and smaller and we die. That’s what’s missing for me. What can we do to grow the church?”

The easy answer would be to swing open the doors, hang up flyers and invite the neighborhood to join their service. But the services are “uninspiring, dead, unmoving, and irrelevant,” assistant pastor Franshonn Salter wrote in a letter to the congregation, citing friends at the nearby Chicago Theological Seminary who’ve visited and never returned.

The typical Sunday service, largely unchanged over the past few decades, is focused on the church’s aging population. There’s barely any contemporary or gospel music, no dancing, and no call and response. The services are highly liturgical: first a silent meditation followed by a musical prelude, usually something baroque, like Bach. Even when there’s a modern song, like the Christian
rock hit “Our God Is An Awesome God,” the organ gives it a plodding, somber feel. Then there’s a
call to worship, a prayer of confession, an assurance of pardon, readings, and finally a sermon, with
hymns and more classical music in between. The church’s Skinner organ fills the grand sanctuary,
though the musical director doesn’t keep time very well and gets ahead of the choir. It’s just one
more problem for the small, seven-person chorus who strains to be heard above the organ.

Younger congregants also complain about a lack of passion in Reverend Turpin’s sermons.
Turpin is charismatic but soft-spoken, and his sermons often quote academic and theological texts.
Stephanie Uhl has been coming to United since she was a freshman at the University of Chicago in
1997. But in the past few years she’s stopped looking forward to Sunday. “They’ve become
theoretical exercises,” she says. Turpin will preach about hunger, inequality or other world problems,
but fails to connect them to her day-to-day life. “I agree those are important issues, but how do I
work on them as an individual? He never shares any personal stories—it’s always based on a book or
a theory or historical context.” On a recent Sunday, five of the 47 congregants were slumped over in
their pew, asleep by the time Turpin began his sermon—most of them were the elderly members the
sermons are geared towards.

Many of those older congregants have been at United almost every Sunday since 1970, when
the predominately Presbyterian church merged with a local Methodist congregation. This is still
thought of as the church’s heyday; membership was high enough to have two morning services. One
was for the more conservative Presbyterians, who were even stricter about music than the current
United membership and frowned upon outbursts by babies. The incoming Methodists, many of who
had young children, shied away from these high church services and created their own. There,
children cried and ran up and down the aisles, and the choir sometimes sang to acoustic guitar. At
the beginning of every service, the pastor called all the children down to the front and spoke with
them for a few minutes about that week’s theme—without sermonizing—and led their own “joys
and concerns” gathering, just like the adults had. Then they were off to Sunday school.

United was also part of a thriving social community. There were annual “Concerts for a
Rainy Day,” Christmas pageants, summer camps for children, dining clubs and bowling trips. The
biggest event of the year was Shrove Tuesday, a combination of Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday.
Families came to church Tuesday night for a pancake dinner—fatty pancakes being the perfect way
to use up all the fat in a household before Lent—and pancake-balancing relay races before getting
their ashes.

The main event was the costume parade. All the families dressed up back then, but the best
by far were the Audrains—Cal, Ann and their four children. Decades later, everyone remembers
their costumes—the year they dressed up as a family of birds, Cal sporting a five-foot wide, painted-
cardboard train or the time they came as a fire-breathing Chinese dragon, the six of them inside the
snake costume covered in a rainbow of crepe paper. One year, they arrived with a seemingly drab
caterpillar costume: they stood tallest to shortest, covered in a long white sheet with some hastily-
made antennas glued to the top. “Have we seen the last great Shrove Tuesday parade?” Cal
remembers hearing his friends say. As they walked around the rec room in the parade, the Audrain’s
youngest son grabbed the sheet above him and stood still, pulling the sheet off his family as they
continued to march. Cal and Ann, now uncovered, revealed colorful butterfly wings they’d tucked
under their arms. Now that the Audrain’s children are grown, like all congregants their age, Shrove
Tuesdays parades are thing of the past.

Tracy Lampkins remembers those costumes and the friends she made in Sunday school.
Now she takes her daughter Geneva to United every Sunday. Lampkins makes Geneva, 7, come
because she hopes Geneva will get to experience the vibrant church community she remembers,
back when there was plenty of children and young adults. But Geneva is one of three children under
who come regularly and she, like most young congregants who visit, thinks the songs are sad and boring.

Lampkins agrees that services aren’t spiritually fulfilling for younger generations. “I come to church because I should come to church, but the reason I should come is because I feel fulfilled. I should walk out of those doors and say ‘Alright!’” Lampkins says at the congregational meeting, stomping her foot and clapping her hands. “I should feel ready for the week ahead. But that’s not the way I’m feeling. I’m here today because I want that feeling.”

But the current service is what most of the congregation wants.

“Theoretically, yes, everyone should be comfortable in our worship service,” says Turpin, who came to United in 2000. “I’m finding the older people in our church want a worship service that they like. And they don’t tolerate a lot of drums and hip-hop music.”

Salter, who is black and raised in a gospel-singing church, used to deliver sermons once a month a few years ago. She had the organist play snappy, gospel numbers and roamed the aisles as she spoke. She didn’t care much for the structured liturgy the church normally uses, so she threw it out in favor of a “blacker” service aimed at Hyde Park’s younger generations. It was a radical change for many congregants.

“Franshonn is like a TV preacher,” says Cal Audrain, the newly appointed chair of the worship committee, in charge of dictating what kind of service the church has. Audrain’s committee hasn’t met since he’s been chair, but he says he doesn’t want Salter’s preaching to become the norm at United. “The loudness of it is annoying.”

But Salter’s style of preaching is exactly what the majority of Protestant churches are offering. More worship contains “drums, jumping or shouting or dancing, raising hands in praise, applause, calling out amen, and visual projection equipment” than ever before writes Duke sociology professor Mark Chaves in his upcoming book American Religion: Contemporary Trends. Chaves also says having a vibrant youth community is one of the key factors in keeping a church from declining.

Social activities, like United’s Shrove Tuesday dinner, keep young adults and children from leaving the church community.

It’s not just that older members dislike rap or impassioned preaching, but they find that kind of theatricality almost sacrilegious. “The purpose of the sermon is a educational one,” Audrain says. He’s quick to point out he dislikes high-church solemnity almost as much as megachurch services with “follow-the-bouncing-ball singing” projected on screens—after all, his children used to run around the pews during service—but he doesn’t want United to have the type of singing and dancing that warrant applause. “It changes from worship to performance. If it starts to seem like somebody is entertaining you it’s not reaching a spiritual understanding.”

Beverly Taylor also thinks Salters sermons bordered on “fire and brimstone.” Taylor, who is black, says the differences are less racial than generational. Taylor grew up on the South Side in the 1940s, listening to the same types of songs United uses—hymns and anthems—but the choirs she was a part of were larger and sung with more energy. “I can tolerate gospel, but when it gets noisy and people start jumping, I don’t like it,” she says.

The issue is a contentious one at United. Taylor used to sit on the worship committee and would suggest changes to services: Why don’t we blend the styles, add a little bit of modern music? Even if we old fogies don’t love it, it helps grow the church, so what’s the harm? Taylor was shot down every time by members committed to tradition. Tired of having no input, Taylor resigned.

Even older members who say they support changing the style of worship aren’t entirely committed. Jesse Bradford, Carol’s husband, says he’s open to “changing the culture” of United. But a minute later, he says his “druthers” would be to have everything stay the same. “They want you to change to their agenda,” he says, referring to college and graduate students who sometimes visit. “I can assure you that’s not going to happen. Why do they come here in the first place? Things have
been done a certain way for 56 years for a reason. When they leave, I say good riddance. You should fit in. You should fit in with the rest of the folk.” Jesse admits his opinions may not be the best for the church, but if he loses out he’ll still show up every week.

Jesse is part of a core group at United who helped form the earlier, family-oriented service in the ’70s. They still view United mainstays like the “joys and concerns” at the end of each service as major breaks with institutional tradition. But now those breaks have become the new traditions. His wife Carol says people like Jesse and herself have a hard time thinking about change again. “Those of us who have been around a while feel we were the Young Turks at one time,” she says. “Now we’re the old guard, and so it’s taken us a while to realize we have to do some changing again.”

That hesitance threatens to push the Bradford’s son Prentice, one of United’s strongest supporters, away from the church. Prentice says the church he grew up is still spiritually fulfilling, but he worries about his two-year-old son Roman. Roman is too young for service and spends Sunday in the church nursery, but soon it will be time for his first church service. Prentice hopes to stay at United, but may have to leave if families with young children continue to stay away. “There’s no point in him being there by himself,” Prentice says. “It doesn’t feel good to leave this church behind, but Roman has to be exposed to the Christian life.”

Turpin gets complaints anytime he tries to add something new to his sermons or try a new type of song. “Is the church here to comfort members or to be here for the community? It’s fine if the church wants to keep things just the way it is right now,” Turpin says, “as long as they know they have to write the checks to have another service.”

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Cameron Butler couldn’t care less about what type of service United has. He doesn’t care what kind of music is played, what the sermons are about or how they’re delivered. But he does care about his sixth grade science exam next week.

Cameron, 12, is one of three kids who sometimes comes to United on Sunday’s for Salter’s youth services. The trio meets in the second floor lounge, a large room that smells like chalk. The lounge is sparsely furnished: a futon, a desk and chairs, and a couple of bookshelves with an outdated set of Grolier’s World Book. But this Sunday the other two children are sick and Cameron is alone.

Cameron used to go to Trinity United Church of Christ with his parents, the church made famous by its long-time pastor Jeremiah Wright. That church has no problem with finances or membership—it’s the largest UCC church in the country. Cameron liked the praise dancing, gospel songs and passionate sermons well enough, but with over 600 kids in the youth program, he felt alone in the church. So his parents sent him to Salter’s program in United, one of the few times the church’s small youth program attracted a member.

Salter is careful to hold her sessions during normal services—that way the kids don’t have to sit through the services she thinks are so boring. Instead, they watch and DVDs with energetic slam poetry aimed to interest teens in worship. “He is real./Realer than touch./See. Hear. Smell or taste./Realer than reality./He is our reality.” Cameron thinks the soft guitar music underneath the poetry is lame, but he likes the poem.

“That was, that was deep man,” Salter says after the clip is over. “Can you flow like that?”

There are other videos—an “I’m a Mac” spoof pitting the Bible vs. Mammon (Wealth) and stories of teens that found religion in high school. When they’re over, Salter and Cameron pray and Salter hammers home the importance of making good decisions. And then it’s time to go—Cameron usually walks to his house on 49th and Cornell, but today he lingers. He sits slumped back in his chair, talking with Salter about his upcoming test and what videogames he’s playing.
Salter’s already recruited Cameron to help get the word out about United. She’s agreed to pay him $1 each Sunday for each of his friends he brings to the youth group. So far, he hasn’t brought any. The last time he passed out flyers at school, several kids tossed theirs on the ground without a second glance, though one took the time to draw a moustache on the photographed woman before throwing his away.

In the past, United’s youth groups were happy to offer services for neighborhood kids, like tutoring or daycare, without exposing them to religion or involving their parents. The disconnect between youth group and church membership left some older members skeptical that offering attractive youth and family programs would increase overall membership. That’s why many support the plan to cut services like the youth ministry in order to keep the church’s budget balanced. “Our outreach hasn’t grown the church,” Audrain, the worship chairman says. “Local parents are just happy to have some nice people watch their kids for a while.”

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Lampkins may find United’s services wanting, but she refuses to leave. It would be a betrayal, especially since the church needs a young family like hers to attract new members. Lampkins takes it upon herself each year to organize the church’s Shrove Tuesday services. They’re barely recognizable from the celebrations of her childhood—there are no costumes, no parade, just pancakes.

This year, members mill around the rec room, green and purple tablecloths on the care tables, a basket of bright party beads in the middle of the room. The turnout is large considering how few people come to a typical Sunday service—there are about 25 adults and 5 children. After everyone’s had their pancakes and coffee, it’s time for some fun—pancake races, a holdover from years past. People line up single file on each side of the room, facing each other. Geneva Lampkins and her older brother Gabriel, 13, demonstrate: Geneva balances a pancake on a spatula and walks calmly to the other side of the room and passes it off to Gabriel. The key is to keep the pancake from hitting the floor. Gabriel puts his spatula on top of the pancake and presses down hard before Geneva twists her spatula upside down; when she lifts her spatula up, the pancake rests neatly on Gabriel’s.

Tracy yells go, and they’re off. Prentice runs across the room and hands his pancake off to Bill Bigelow, a retired minister from Florida who recently moved to Hyde Park. Bigelow strolls back and flips the pancake into Uhl’s spatula. Uhl to Salter. Salter to Mary Audrain. Audrain to Roman. Drop. “Oh no!” everyone happily yells, as Roman picks his pancake up off the floor. As the race continues, plenty of pancakes drop and soon people are laughing. The race is supposed to end when everyone’s back where he or she started, but no one notices until they’re out of breath.

It’s time for the short ash services and everyone files into the sanctuary. One by one they take their seats, but unlike Sunday services when hardly anyone sits next to each other, everyone packs into the first six pews on the far left side. It’s a small thing, but just that physical closeness makes Turpin’s short sermon more engaging. It helps that Turpin plays folksy spiritual music from a boom box on the floor, and the whole audience sings along.

This kind of service—bite-sized sermons, no organ music, baby talk filling the room—is the only way Turpin sees United surviving. He’d like to run three services: the usual service for older members; one for college and graduate students with modern songs and less formal sermons; and one for teens and children, “real urban” with hip hop music, dancing, and non-liturgical preaching like Salter’s.

Roman, just barely able to walk, runs away from his father in the last pew up to the music up front. Teetering in front of Turpin, he shifts his bops from side to side in beat to the music. Turpin grabs his hand and leads him in circles up front, twirling him around. As Turpin starts his sermon,
Roman walks back to his dad, but when he gets there decides, not to sit down. He walks back and forth, looking side to side at the listening congregants as he passes. Soon his four-year-old cousin joins him as they roam the aisles. Older members who have steadfastly refused to change music are finally seeing the simple power youth involvement in a service can have. Their eyes light up and they coo as the boys pass.