

Rev. Arthur Price and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church
A Case Study Prepared by Gary Furr

Biographical Introduction of Arthur Price

Arthur Price grew up in Philadelphia. He was born on August 23, 1965. As a boy, he lived in a neighborhood he described as a drug-infested, dangerous area of South Philadelphia known as the Southwark Housing Projects. He saw many people around him fall into lives of drugs and crime. Though it was not typical of that neighborhood, Arthur was fortunate to grow up in a two-parent household. His father worked at a social agency and his mother was a teacher's aide in the public school system.

His parents were not involved in the church, but it was important to them that he and his siblings go. Arthur alone in his family remained active in the church. "The church, I felt," he says, "offered me a sense of family and purpose not fulfilled at home."¹

Arthur became extremely active in the church and emerged as a leader of the youth in his congregation. Because of his passion and commitment, he says he was often teased that he would one day become a preacher. His own vision of his life, however, was to become a lawyer. He had taken a class in high school called Introduction to Criminal Justice, out of which he received an internship in the Philadelphia Felony Court System at age 16. This was followed by an internship with then District Attorney Edward Rendell, now the Governor of Pennsylvania which lasted from his senior year in high school until after graduation from Temple University. The District Attorney's Office, seeing Arthur's commitment and value as a criminal justice professional, sought to retain him as a full-time employee. Arthur set his sights on a career as a prosecutor and served for five years in the District Attorney's Office. During this time, he married his wife, Candie, and seemed to be on a clear path to success.

During this formative time, however, Arthur began to struggle once again with the call to the ministry that he had first felt as a young man of sixteen. Six months after he had married, he made public his commitment to the ministry and was licensed to preach.

He enrolled at Colgate Rochester Divinity School in Rochester, New York. During his schooling he had several ministry opportunities which included being a

¹ Interview by Gary Furr.

Minister of Christian Education and Director of Summer Youth Program at Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church, Associate Minister at Mt. Vernon Baptist Church where I served in an interim capacity during the illness and retirement of the pastor, and as a Bible Institute Instructor at Zion Hill Baptist Church.

After graduating with his Master of Divinity degree in 1995, he served as the Pastor of the Memorial Baptist Church in Buffalo, NY from 1998 until November, 2001, when he was called to become Pastor of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

His accomplishments have been considerable in his first five years. He led them in a \$3.8 million Stabilization Campaign. He guided the Church's Foundation in receiving its designation as a National Historic Landmark in February 2006. He directed the church in its effort to receive a \$400,000 grant from Save America's Treasures, December, 2006.

Due to a shrinking membership in recent decades that is sometimes hidden by the large numbers of visitors who come each Sunday from around the world, Sixteenth Street Baptist has faced tremendous financial challenges, including a large mortgage debt that Rev. Price faced when he came to the church in 2001. He immediately undertook to lead the church in a debt reduction campaign and helped reduce the debt by half.

They have purchased additional property to prepare for future expansions. He formulated, wrote, and implemented deacon manuals, employee manuals, new member handbooks, marriage counseling manuals, and all ministry operation guidelines.

He has also taken on the responsibilities that any pastor of this historic church has to assume. He has represented the church in many media outlets, including press conferences, newspaper articles both locally and nationally, and appeared in the March 2006 issue of Jet Magazine, in Black Enterprise Magazine and interviews by radio stations in this country and the United Kingdom.

The Two Histories of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

Sixteenth Street Baptist Church is a church with two histories. The first one is its public history, one which is fixed forever in a single moment on a clock whose hands were frozen on a fateful day in 1963. In one sense, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama does not need an introduction at all—it is perhaps one of the ten

best-known congregations in America. Its identity is rooted in the bombing. And yet in another, it is not that well-known at all. Its prominence and location made it a primary staging and meeting space for the civil rights activities of Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the movement that resulted in the pivotal protests and the related violence of that turbulent time.²

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church served as an organizational headquarters and rallying point for blacks protesting widespread institutionalized racism in the United States. Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King, Jr. were frequent speakers at the church.

On Sunday, September 15, 1963, according to later trials, Bobby Frank Cherry and Robert Edward Chambliss, members of the Ku Klux Klan, planted 19 sticks of dynamite in the basement of the church. At 10:22 a.m., they exploded, killing four young girls—Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Denise McNair—and injuring 22 others. A funeral for three of the four victims (eulogized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) was attended by over 8,000 mourners, white and black.

It was one of a string of bombings that had terrorized progressive agitators in the city for more than a decade, but in this case, the taking of indisputably innocent lives shocked the city, the nation and the world. The bombing is credited with helping push forward passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Following the bombing, over \$300,000 in unsolicited gifts were received and repairs were begun immediately. The church reopened on June 7, 1964. A stained glass window depicting a crucified black Christ, designed by the Welsh artist John Petts, was donated by the citizens of Wales and installed in the front window, facing south.

In 1980, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 1993, a team of surveyors for the Historic American Buildings Survey

² Arthur Price's predecessor, Christopher M. Hamlin, has written a history of the church, *Behind the Stained Glass: A History of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church* Birmingham, Alabama: Crane Hill Publishers, 1998. See also Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954 -1963*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988; Glenn T. Eskew, *But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. Interestingly, Glenn is the son of members of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. See also Diane McWhorter. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama--The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution..* Simon & Schuster, .

executed measured drawings of the church for archival in the Library of Congress. On February 20, 2006, the church was officially dedicated as a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior.

As part of Birmingham's Civil Rights District, which is promoted by the city for heritage tourism, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church receives over 200,000 visitors annually.

The church is currently engaged in a \$3.8 million restoration of the building, which has had persistent water damage problems and is facing failure of the brick exterior. The first phase of restoration, mainly below-grade waterproofing, has been completed. To assist in this effort, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church has just been awarded a \$400,000 grant from the Save America's Treasures organization.

The "other history" of Sixteenth Street is the ordinary history of a congregation that has been in one place for a long, long time. That church has faced the usual struggles to be a church in a downtown location. The confluence of these two histories in the years since September 15, 1963 has linked them to each other. The changes that that single event brought about, not only in the church but the city and all of American culture, brought about changes that ironically endangered the future of the church as a viable congregation even as its status as an icon of the Civil Rights movement grew.

Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was organized and as the first African American Baptist Church in the city of Birmingham in 1873. The city had been founded only two years earlier. The current site moved to its present location in 1880. The current building was built in 1911. Its central location and historical prominence have made it a place where many famous visitors, speakers and preachers as well as performers have appeared through the years³

The present building is a "modified Romanesque and Byzantine design"⁴ by the prominent black architect Wallace Rayfield was constructed by the local black contractor

³ According to the internet Wikipedia article such notables as As one of the primary institutions in the black community, Sixteenth Street Baptist has hosted prominent visitors throughout its history. W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson and Ralph Bunche all spoke at the church during the first part of the 20th century. The sanctuary also served as one of the largest auditoriums available to the black citizens of Birmingham. Concerts by notable artists such as W. C. Handy frequently animated the building in the evenings. It continues to be a prominent meeting space for nationally and locally significant gatherings, especially regarding race relations. [http://www.bhamwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title= Sixteenth_Street_Baptist_Church](http://www.bhamwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=Sixteenth_Street_Baptist_Church).

⁴ Hamlin, *Behind the Stained Glass*, p. 17.

T.C. Windham in 1911. The cost of construction was \$26,000. In addition to the main sanctuary, the building houses a basement auditorium, used for meetings and lectures, and several ancillary rooms used for Sunday school and smaller groups. So these are the two histories of this church. One is the story the world knows well. It's renown is worldwide. It is telling that one of the most powerful visual symbols of that story is the clock that was in the sanctuary when the bomb exploded, freezing its hands at the moment when four little girls died and the church's identity forever changed.

The second story is the long story of the oldest African American church in the city, one with an ambivalent relationship to its most famous moment and which has sought to continue as a living, vital and ongoing family of faith. It has had to do this as the downtown area of Birmingham has suffered the same general changes of most American cities, particularly in the South. As populations moved out to the suburbs in the Sixties and Seventies, Sixteenth Street faced several challenges to maintaining its congregational mission and viability.

The new "celebrity" that came out of the painful crisis of the bombing kept a spotlight on a congregation that had not always been comfortable in the role as a lightning rod of social change in the community. This new identity as a shrine of sorts for the civil rights era was and continues to be in tension with the historic identity and self-understanding of the church as a Christian church with an evangelical identity. There was and continues to be an ongoing ambivalence with this identity, not so much in embracing it as how best to connect these two realities.

The Sixteenth Street church known as a visual symbol to the world can become almost a museum to the outside world. The Sixteenth Street that still lives and worships and ministers to the community is a living congregation that seeks to be a church that is about more than one frozen moment in 1963. According to the history by Christopher Hamlin, this history has continued to live in another way, however. The trials of those responsible languished in the justice system until 2002, when the last of the conspirators was finally sentenced to prison.⁵

If anything, Sixteenth Street was also a mirror of the tumult that all downtown churches were undergoing during the Sixties and Seventies. Urban transition, the flight

⁵ *Behind the Stained Glass*, pp. 95-106.

of white families to the suburbs, the changes in the Civil Rights movement and its focus after the death of Dr. King, and the cultural changes that followed in American politics and religion all presented their challenges to the church.

Furthermore, the church faced many great internal challenges in the period since 1963. During this time, the leadership of the church, according to Hamlin, often struggled with pastoral leadership over many issues. He writes, in a sentence that may have dismayed some congregational leaders, that when he arrived in 1990 that “I discovered that Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, one of the nation’s most prestigious churches, was in spiritual ruin, paralyzed, in need of major renovation/restoration of its facilities, and sustained by less than 125 members.”⁶ He also saw great potential. This led Hamlin to conclude that the rebuilding of trust and relationships were paramount for the church by 1990 when he began his ministry.⁷

This second history is the internal and self-consciously Christian history of the church. If it has been difficult for the congregation, it is understandable. It is hard to know how any church would have handled the massive publicity, the urban and cultural changes, the population shifts, the intrusion of national and international politics and personalities, and the financial challenges that came after 1963. Sixteenth Street went from a typical, if prominent, black congregation in a major American city to cultural symbol.

So its second history is still ongoing. It is its history to recover, restore, and rebuild its internal Christian identity even as it carries the unavoidable presence as historic place and visual for the world. This second history brought challenges to its denominational and spiritual self-understanding. In terms of larger connections, Sixteenth Street Baptist is affiliated with the more conservative black Baptist group, the National Baptist Convention USA. As it faces its future, it continues to face the challenges all Baptist churches do in the face of a post-denominational time as to its historic identity. What will that be?

⁶ Ibid., p. xiv.

⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

This second history brought many very practical challenges as well, challenges of survival, financial viability and mission. The church is small in membership. This surprises most people when they first join. Because of its national visibility and prominence, there is rarely a Sunday that does not bring large numbers of tourists and visitors to the church. It is known as “Everybody’s Church.” It appears larger to the outside eye than it really is.

In actuality, Sixteenth Street has about 300 members on roll and averages about 200 members per Sunday. This has meant that the church struggles financially to carry on its ministry at the same time that the community and world perceives its size and means to be otherwise. One of the painful but important tasks that Rev. Arthur Price undertook when he arrived was to determine more accurate numbers of involvement and participation. There were 580 on roll when he came, but months later, after finding those who were attending other churches, had moved, or had died, he realized that the church was half that size.

In terms of demographics, he said, there is a good mix of young children, teens, 40-somethings, baby boomers, and “senior adults. The group that is highly missing are 25-30 year olds, although that is not rare in most churches. Of more concern is the fact that a majority live 17-25 miles away from the church (some as far as the towns of Calera and Sylacauga). On the positive side, however, is that the church under Rev. Price’s leadership has added 120 new members in last 4 years. (70 long-time members)

The church has also faced challenges during the recent period in terms of its structure, dynamics and leadership. At times there have been internal leadership struggles. Some of this has been true throughout the church’s history. The church has had 16 pastors since the beginning of the church, with an average tenure of about 10 years. Often tenures in African-American congregations tend to be much longer than that in strong situations.

The congregation itself wrestles with its civil rights legacy. Arthur Price describes them as being of two minds about it. There is, he says, a group that loves the history of Sixteenth Street – they see it as a blessing and legacy they need to uphold.

Another group in the current church is less concerned with the church's history. They want to be nurtured and empowered, he says, to live Christian life in secular society.⁸

Chris Hamlin's choice of stained glass for the metaphor in his title for the history he wrote is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the beautiful rose window in the sanctuary suffered a terrible and ironic bit of damage on that day. It is one of the major features in the sanctuary, and it is a very traditional stained-glass window portrayal of Revelation 3:20 at the end of John's letters from God to the seven churches of Asia Minor.⁹ It is a picture of Jesus Christ standing at a door and knocking.

Similar windows can be found in Baptist churches, black and white, throughout the deep South today, especially those built around the early twentieth century as Sixteenth Street Church was. This image was a common theme in revivalist preaching of that era and to the present day among conservative evangelical Christians. It is often used as an appeal to individuals to repent of their sins and accept Christ as Savior. He is often described as knocking on the door of a person's heart. To be a Christian is to open one's heart and life to Jesus and receive Him as Lord.

The King James rendering of this text lent itself to the revivalism and its very individualistic interpretation of that time.

However, another interpretation of this text sets it in the context of Revelation 2 and 3. It comes at the end of seven letters to the congregations, encouraging them to remain faithful to Christ in a time of persecution. In the light of that context, Revelation 3:20 can be understood to mean that Christ is knocking on the door of the churches of that time under great stress and asking to be the center of their life and help them stand faithfully in a time of compromise and testing.

The second window that Hamlin refers to is one that has come since the bombing as a gift to the congregation from Welsh stained-glass artist John Petts. It is based upon Matthew 25, the judgment text in which Jesus confronts those who have failed to minister to those who are hungry, thirsty, in prison, or alone. Christ identifies with those in need,

⁸ Interview at Samford University, May 11, 2006, by Kristin Curtis.

⁹ The King James Version said, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." More recently, the NRSV renders this, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."

the text says, and therefore when we do good to them, we do good to Him. When we fail to do good to them or harm them, we do the same to Christ.¹⁰ Hamlin describes the window thus:

The Wales Window for Alabama [is] a multicolored window featuring a Jesus of African heritage whose large hands are extended in revolutionary protest and God's reconciling love. Petts based his image of Jesus on a picture he had seen of a black protester taking part in a street demonstration in the South. The man's arms were flung above his head, and his body was gyrating as he was assaulted with fire hoses. The Jesus in the window Petts designed symbolized the crucified Christ and forms the upright beam of a cross, while a stylized stream of water from a fire hose forms the cross beam. Petts wanted to connect the Birmingham Civil Rights movement with the ongoing struggle in South Africa and thereby symbolize oppression everywhere. So he painted bullets onto the top beam of the cross to represent the innocent children and adults being gunned down in Sharpeville, South Africa and other places in the world. He used a rainbow-colored nimbus on the Christ figure in the window to symbolize that God loves every person equally without respect to nationality, race or creed—for we are one in Christ Jesus. At the bottom of the window, Petts placed the words of Christ, the words that Reverend Cross had intended to say in the sermon he did not give on Sunday, September 15, 1963: "You Did It to Me."¹¹

Ironically, once more, these were the words of the text that Rev. John H. Cross, pastor of Sixteenth Street Baptist, had intended to preach on for his sermon on September 15, 1963 when the bomb went off. He never delivered that sermon.

In the basement of the church there is a clock that stopped at moment of the bombing of September 15, 1963. I had once suggested in a conversation with Arthur Price that this is a good metaphor for the church – they are trying to start the clock again. They are holding in tension these values of honoring the history and being a vital congregation that empowers people today.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:35-40 says , "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

¹¹ Hamlin, *Behind the Stained Glass*, 63-65.

I now think, however, that this is not a good metaphor. The church is not stuck in 1963. Two pastors in succession have four major efforts into trying to do restorative work and to cast a new vision of the present and future. The leadership, in their interviews, show great awareness both in what they see their pastor leading them to do and in the dilemma they face. Their bigger questions are about the financial, neighborhood and practical realities of their ministry situation.

I believe that these two windows are the most effective metaphors for the church, symbolizing the two histories. One is traditional, from the past. It had to be renovated, because the face of Jesus in the window was blown out by the explosion, another irony of that day. The other is of a transformed identity that incorporates the biblical tradition into the current and lived experience of the church.

These two identities, however, are not contradictory. They both grow out of the biblical story. They both are about the faithfulness of the church to its heritage and simultaneously to the needs and realities of the world. They both express the challenges of integrating these two without overemphasizing one at the expense of the other.

Arthur Price's ministry has represented, both in his comments about what he is trying to do, as well as the leaders' indication of their understanding of that, a positive new direction. They have affirmed that he is doing what they need. Both he and the church recognize the powerful importance of September 15, 1963. They also recognize the urgency of the present moment and the challenges of the approaching future. He and the church have self-consciously sought to keep these two together as they face their challenges in being a distinctively Christian church and a cultural symbol

Sixteenth Street and the Changing Face of Birmingham

In many regards, the story of Sixteenth Street Baptist and Vestavia Hills Baptist Church mirror the story of Birmingham, Alabama. Population in metropolitan Birmingham declined from approximately 286,000 persons in 1980 to less than 237,000 in 2003. At the same time, the suburbs to the south, east, and even the north continue to

show growth. The overall metropolitan area of Birmingham continues to grow overall, but the area now encompasses sixteen school districts, and across multiple counties.¹²

This means, at least theoretically, that the downtown churches represented by Sixteenth Street Baptist, face declines in those who might be members of the church. And it means that churches like Vestavia Hills Baptist, theoretically, ought to grow easily. In fact this is not always the case, since churches are extremely complex organisms. It is possible to see tiny congregations in thriving suburban areas that seem to have been passed by the growth of the area. There are many reasons why this may be so—conflicts, leadership problems, ethnic identity that makes adaptation challenging, denominational issues, and many others.

The Leadership of Arthur Price

At Sixteenth Street, the young pastor faced a challenge that was larger than he comprehended at first. He saw that his challenge was to provide stable and even firm leadership. He believed that the church needed revitalization from within. Its role in the community was clear and even unavoidable, but the changing realities of its immediate field of service as well as its struggle to redefine its inner vitality after 1963 left the church, as Arthur's predecessor had agreed, with a more difficult set of inward challenges than perhaps would meet the untrained eye.

Arthur set out to, as he described it, to develop others by developing their potential and build up the leadership and ministries of the church. He believes that a lot of churches are hindered because goals unclear. He saw his call as one to clearly direct leaders to a mission-motivated ministry.

He also acknowledged that this was a role expected of him. The African American tradition often expects ministers to assume enormous authority. This has created some inner challenges for Arthur as he also wants to genuinely empower and delegate to others within the church. He wants to see lay leaders rise up and take greater

¹² During the same period, Jefferson County, in which both Vestavia Hills and Birmingham are located, held steady in total population, indicating a shift to the suburban centers. Even more of concern for the downtown area, of course, is the fact that Shelby County has increased in the same period from 98,000 to about 190,000 people. Statistics from the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce website. <http://birminghamchamber.com/business/reports/population.html#mpt>

responsibility for the church, yet the past struggles for power between laity and clergy make this challenging.

The immediate issue, naturally, was for the church to become fiscally sound. Arthur set about to address this and various campaigns as well as a grant effort have made headway in that direction.

His style is highly directive and confident. He rightly recognized that with the numerical and financial challenges that the church faced that it could not afford a laissez-faire style of leadership. He is decisive and comfortable with his leadership of others. He wears his authority comfortably.

Because of this confidence in his authority, Arthur can make things happen quickly. He is able to take a high degree of initiative. And this strongly matches the congregation's overt expectations and traditional understanding of his role. However, the negative "shadow" side of this sense of authority plays out in two ways. First, on a congregational level, this high expectation of pastoral authority can, at times, create passivity in lay leadership. This often frustrates Arthur because one of his stated goals is to bring forth greater lay involvement, ownership and initiative.

An ongoing issue for him as a leader and for them as a congregation is to be clearer about the passivity towards leadership and what it means. More importantly, they will need to discover how to move into a different model to build their future. Arthur will be challenged to think about how he can do this and deal effectively with the discomfort that will come in the transition.

The other way this high expectation of pastoral authority plays out is that it leaves him as the pastor very isolated and alone in the community. Many of those interviewed voiced to him and to me on different occasions that they desired to "feel" closer to him, yet were not very clear about how he could overcome that. It may be difficult for both pastor and church to understand that their understanding of pastoral authority is part of that issue as well as his personality style.

Both Arthur and several interviewed leaders in his congregation expressed the desire to "feel" closer relationally. At least this common desire might enable them to explore how this might be strengthened. Some described him as personally "shy," which

Arthur finds not exactly accurate, but “reserved” is probably a better term. He is somewhat of an introvert and therefore does not always offer what is going on with him.

Arthur described the difference in our leadership styles as similar to that between Paul and Barnabas in the New Testament. He likened himself to being more like Paul, whom he described as “mean and nasty,” at least in the sense that Paul was unworried about conflict and its impact (temporarily at least) on relationships. The down side of this, of course, is the isolation, misunderstanding and loneliness that sometimes comes with those who are authoritative and commanding. Arthur doesn’t worry about conflict and the congregation expects this of him.

I, on the other hand, have strengths in process, relationship and facilitating conflict resolution. I am less comfortable with conflict than he is and tend to manage it rather than sometimes letting it be what it is. Arthur recognized, however, that these two sides can be also accessed and developed in each of us. He noted that my strength with process could be helpful to him in some of the developmental tasks of the congregation where the building of consensus and drawing out a sense of ownership and initiative will be critical.

His style is also deeply Biblical and theologically evangelical. He believed that the church needed to move out of its walls, more into the community, and to be more concerned with reaching people for Christ.

He utilizes preaching and teaching as a way to set forth clear directions and mandates for what the church needs to be doing. He is comfortable casting a vision for the church.

The challenges have come with time. After the initial successes, he is now reaching the more challenging issues. There is a core of new members and believers who have come since he arrived. There is also the long-time core of the church which has a different experience and perspective about the church. The old core and new core face many challenges in coming together. The older group is naturally more resistant to the ongoing changes that he and the newer group believe it must engage. The new group has great zeal, sometimes in less than productive ways.

The church also faces the big picture challenges of its mission identity. There is passivity and lessened interest in traditional denominational ties. This is part of the scene

in every current American congregation, of course, but Sixteenth Street faces these as well. One wonders if its place in the national limelight has not hastened that loosening of its ties with traditional black denominational status. This does not express itself so much as a desire to disconnect as it does an unenthusiastic and somewhat passive participation.

The same passivity expresses itself in those who are less passionate about reaching out into the community or about the particular programs and approaches to that outreach.

So Arthur finds himself with a question: I can see the next place we need to go to and there's a lot of work needed to get there. We clearly know what it is. But how do we overcome the passivity and resistance to shifting a longtime system of doing things in new directions?

His lay leaders recognize these same issues, so in that regard he has been successful in articulating the questions they face. It is a unique set of issues, because there is a true sense that, as a historical moment of such prominence in American history, there is no way Sixteenth Street's church facility will not have a long and well-tended future. The congregation, however, as a dynamic, living organism, is not so well-guaranteed.

Turning the Past into a Future: Challenges and Opportunities for Sixteenth Street

It is impossible to consider either the strengths of the church or its challenges apart from one another. Often they are one and the same. Sixteenth Street Baptist, as much as any church I have ever thought about, embodies its ministry opportunities and problems in a series of paradoxical realities.

If this sounds dire, let me clarify. Sixteenth Street's challenges are also, ironically, its possibilities and strengths. If its location is remote from much of the membership, it could also learn to see itself as a church that draws from a larger radius than the immediate neighborhood. Its historic identity offers immediate recognition around the world. The story of 1963 is unavoidable as a part of its identity.

In terms of outreach, for example, the church is the kind of unique setting that could consider ambitiously (in the sense of “ambition for the gospel”¹³ Many mega-churches today easily draw membership from a radius of thirty miles. In a metropolitan area like Birmingham, the greater area of which contains about a million people, Sixteenth Street could envision a ministry that drew people who wanted to identify with the congregation and make commitments to be part of its unique vision of prophetic and evangelistic ministry.

Even though its mission “field” might continue to be the downtown area and the neighborhoods around, its “evangelistic field” might be much larger. Arthur has expressed a hope that his church will see the need to be more intentional in this work of outreach. He said:

The serious realities and challenges left for Sixteenth Street are outreach, history, identification as a tourist attraction, staffing needs, worship style conflicts, and spatial limitations. The outreach challenge exists because for so long Sixteenth Street has been identified as the place to go to, thus creating for the church a persona of a rallying place for individuals to flock. The church has not, therefore, fully embraced the necessity to reach out and compel men and women to come, thus fulfilling the Great Commission as outlined in the vision.¹⁴

The good news is that his congregation has heard and understood his framing of this issue—at least theoretically. One member who is a leader, when interviewed by me, said, “We should be seeking the lost and bringing them to Christ. If the church is into anything other than that, we are in the wrong business, and I believe that’s what our mission is first and foremost and hope the pastor wouldn’t say anything different than that.” Another agreed with this assessment and added, “Rev. Price is trying to get us away from this image that we are a museum. He wants to portray us as a vital, living ministry trying to spread the good news.”

What the church must continue to do, it seems clear to its leaders, is to better connect the story of its fame as a suffering servant in the Civil Rights struggle with the

¹³ See Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry (Pulpit & Pew)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006.

¹⁴Written statement by Arthur Price.

story of a pilgrim people who voluntarily make the commitment to continue to be affiliated with that place and story. Further, it can be a model of a church where social ministry to the least of these is not in contradiction to the robust passion of disciples sharing their faith in Jesus and helping one another grow in their faith.

It seemed obvious to me, both in talking with the pastor and the people, that they understand that these are their challenges. They seem to want to do it. The ongoing challenges will be about funding and processing pathways to that possible future. They must not only see that they should grow and reach out, but also how this requires changes in the way they think about doing church together. The pathways by which those identities can actually connect are rather daunting. In practical reality, people often prefer one over the other.

The history of Sixteenth Street Baptist is both a strength and a serious challenge. Which it ultimately becomes depends upon the ability of the congregation with God's help to fashion a new vitality. This is not unlike the challenge of the city of Birmingham itself. Its politics, discourse among leaders, and self-perceptions continue to be deeply rooted in the events of the early 1960s.

I have attended the annual Martin Luther King breakfast many times through the years. I have enjoyed being there, and have tried to come not as a "white pastor" or a "suburban Christian," but as a member of the larger community, interested to know more about the place where I live. What has been helpful, though, is coming as an "outsider," as one who neither grew up nor lived in either Birmingham or Alabama prior to 1993.

Because I was not from here, there are things I cannot understand or appreciate about what this city went through. But there are also things I think I can see that natives do not seem to see very well. There is an ongoing struggle to learn how to move on without forgetting the past, if I might put it that way.

In coming to the breakfasts, it was striking to me how singularly the leadership, speakers and content of the program focused on "remembering and not forgetting." The speakers were always people who were part of the movement, as would be appropriate. But it was striking to me how rarely someone focused upon the themes of current progress, positive celebrations, or what the future might hold for us. Some, of course, did. And the purpose of a memorial holiday is to remember.

Still, in the light of the Old Testament prophets, remembering was always a way to understand the present and upon up the future. Martin Luther King himself was masterful at doing this—calling America to repentance and to imagine new structures of justice and life not by new things, but by better understanding the things we already knew. It was the words of our own Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Holy Scriptures, and especially the teachings of Jesus that most Americans claimed some allegiance to that called us to change.

This new synthesis is rare, of course, but Sixteenth Street is a congregation that could embody a powerful new future by attempting this in its life. Its pastors since 1963 have, with varying success, sought to lead them through this changing journey.

It is also clear to me that the metropolitan area of Birmingham and not simply the city itself has this disconnect. I find it curious that in the suburbs where I live how that few citizens want to talk much about the Sixties and what happened. For some the memories are painful. For some it brings anger. For many it is awkwardness, or the feeling that it has somehow cast a shadow on the community and blighted its public image to the world.

Many business people I know in the suburbs—and I can recount this perhaps happening dozens of times over the years since I came--make the same comment, almost word for word. “All people think about when they think of Birmingham is dogs and fire hoses and the bombing.” It is startling to me how deep this sense of frustration is.

My reaction has often been, “Why aren’t we proud of what has happened here? The world changed here. I lived in other places up North when this went on—I know racism was there, too. I saw it. But things changed here.” It is curious to me how many suburban people have never been to the Civil Rights Institute or the church to visit. Many have, of course, but there is still a sense of emotional and geographical distance between the city and the outlying areas, though no longer segregated by race, for people of all races live in the suburbs, including many affluent blacks.

So for black people in Birmingham, there is an unspoken and spoken anxiety that we will forget those events and that time. For white and suburban people there is also an unspoken and spoken anxiety that we will never be able to forget a memory many would just as soon not keep bringing up. Our unwillingness to find the ways to do both, it

seems to me, without losing the other explains some of our current political difficulty in solving many of our most basic problems together.

I would call what we have now an ongoing “disconnect” with one another about our history and our future and how to connect them again. There is still racism, of course, and it rears its ugly head from time to time. But even for people of the highest good will, there is the larger question of how to move to a new and hopeful future. For Christians there is a deeper question—how can we embody the ideal of our Founder, as he prayed in the Upper Room, “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21, NRSV).

That this is an ideal is indisputable. The concrete living out of that ideal is another matter. For Sixteenth Street there is the highest opportunity to exercise a Biblical and prophetic leadership for the entire city. Its challenge will be how to become more than the repository of an important memory and an esteemed meeting place.

And here is where they face challenges. The vision is clear and from my interviews, their understanding of it is clear. The resources to carry that out, however, will be a great challenge. The church lacks staff that it needs, leaving the pastor with full responsibility to carry out the most mundane of daily obligations. Sixteenth Street needs the enhancement of basic “survival resources”—staff, programs, budget, and organization—in order to attempt great things in the larger community.

Another issue Sixteenth Street is currently exploring is the issue of worship. They have moved under Arthur’s leadership to introduce “an atmosphere of praise and worship vs. a more traditional style of worship.” This has encountered resistance from some, particularly among some older members. Rather than the traditional devotional period of the service led by the deacons of the church, he led them to take a different approach by incorporating a more lively and interactive devotional service using a Praise Team.

They sought to combine both traditional and contemporary forms of worship in their worship experiences with the stated goal that the desired form of worship, and one that is acceptable to all, would be the merging of both styles to formulate a well rounded, more dynamic worship that reaches the heart of God. This particular issue is not unique

to Sixteenth Street, as it is one that is being debated across the landscape of American churches.

In order to provide an adequate and effective ministry Sixteenth Street must continue to overcome its current spatial challenges. The church is open five days out of the week in order to accommodate the masses of people that visit the church, which limits many of its daytime ministry capabilities. They are also in desperate need of educational space for Sunday School and ministry events. The church's current ministries fill up almost each night of the week with limited space for other ministries to coexist during the same times. Additional space would also alleviate the wear and tear of the current facility.

Once again, this "difficulty" is also an opportunity. The church finds itself welcoming about 100,000 visitors per year. A kingdom perspective on sharing the gospel would see this as an extraordinarily positive opportunity as well as a challenge to the church's own space needs.

Furthermore, a glance at the census data for the surrounding area indicates far more possibilities than first thought. The church struggles to maintain the numbers needed to sustain its viability as a church, but a deeper view indicates that the numbers are there. What may be needed is simply the determination of the church and its laity to reach those people who are there. This will require, of course, a likely shift in mindset and strategies for reaching the people who are there.

The bombing is the most obvious and dominant issue in the minds of the church and its pastor—how do we become more than a museum? How can we be viable in the community? And yet there may be a deeper issue less obvious but no less important. As the most prestigious and well-known black church in Birmingham, and arguably the best-known church in all of Alabama, it might be challenging to change the self-understanding of the congregation that remains to become more energized for outreach. When you are a community meeting space, a famous historical location, and the most historically significant black church in a city, it can be quite challenging to roll up your sleeves and enter into a more "apostolic" mindset.

The truth is, while Sixteenth Street Baptist has one role in the community as an icon, historical memory, and identifiable landmark, it has another in its mission

possibilities. Arthur and I discussed Kirk Hadaway's four-fold congregational typology as a part of our study.¹⁵ Hadaway identifies three typical self-understandings in churches and one ideal type toward which congregations might aspire. First is the club or clan,¹⁶ made up of long-time members who know one another well. The club or clan typically has a pastoral leader who functions almost as a chaplain, but the group identity and stability is paramount. The key defining characteristic is culture. The group has a cultural identity that too much change or growth can threaten.

His second type is the charismatic leader and followers.¹⁷ This is strongly identified with many traditionally black congregations who expect authoritarian leadership from their pastors, but it is typical of all kinds of congregations. In the charismatic model, the church depends on genuinely charismatic leadership for its direction. When that leadership is not present, or leaves, or is a style at variance with the expectation, it can create a crisis. There can also be the appearance of charismatic authority when, in fact, there is another de facto leader or group of leaders who really run the congregation.

The history of Sixteenth Street may indicate that there has been some blend of these first two understandings of their congregation among the people. More specifically, though, its long history of strong pastoral leaders and occasional fiery conflicts with some of those leaders may indicate that the charismatic style of leadership is a part of the self-understanding of the church.

Hadaway's third type, the company or corporation,¹⁸ is one that is typical of the Southern Baptist Convention churches during its heydays of the 1950s and 1960s. Pastors functioned as managers. Churches were program-oriented, committee guided, and highly organized. They functioned through processes, organization and structures. Much good is done by these churches, but they also tend toward becoming highly bureaucratic. This is more typical, in many ways, of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church and most of the white churches in Birmingham.

¹⁵ C. Kirk Hadaway, *Behold I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2001.

¹⁶ Hadaway, 35-40.

¹⁷ Hadaway, 40-42.

¹⁸ Hadaway, 42-44.

The charismatic model generally writes a history of great achievements but also periods of intense conflict, declines, and struggles over leadership and uncertainty. Arthur intuitively recognized some need for more policies, processes, organization and predictability for the church when he arrived. Yet the expectation of charismatic leadership is not easy to renegotiate with a congregation. Bob Dale once characterized this as meaning that along with the expectation of a high degree of action and control by the leader there would be almost a corresponding degree of passivity in the church members.¹⁹

One of the challenges for Arthur, if he is to lead Sixteenth Street towards Hadaway's ideal of congregational life, the incarnational, is to do exactly what he recognized as the great challenge—to help laity take “ownership” of their ministries. Yet this sounds easier in reality than it is in implementation. He faces the struggle of having sufficient numbers in order to have a critical mass of leadership for ministries. He has many members who do not actually live in the community but have moved out to other areas and still come out of loyalty to the church. This means that it is difficult both in terms of time commitments and their sense of connection to the surrounding ministry field to identify strongly with the needs and opportunities that are around.

Still, these are challenges that, to differing degrees, many churches face. The overall possibilities and strengths of Sixteenth Street are tremendous. That is why they can continue to draw capable leaders to their pulpit. The prestige, significance, and visibility of the church presents enormous opportunities for profound ministry. To return to the “serious realities” that the church faces, we might also see tremendous possibilities. Those possibilities can only be realized by a dramatically different approach to doing church in their location.

Some of these approaches are already underway in some of the ministries that Arthur has led the church to do. Yet in the area of outreach, there are some tantalizing statistics to think about. In the U. S. Census of 2000, if one draws a circle around Sixteenth Street church that goes out three miles in every direction, we see great potential. This incorporates six zip codes, most of which are actually less than two miles from the church.

¹⁹ Robert Dale,

According to the census data, in 2000 there were over 61,000 people living in that radius. Over 40,000 of these were African American, and 49,380 were between the ages of 18 and 65. There is a tremendous student population in that area because of the University of Alabama Birmingham, a redeveloping “loft apartments” community moving back into the city, many young adults, as well as families. More near to the church is a population that is poorer, with 11,328 being below the poverty level. Yet among that population are over 37,000 persons with at least high school education, and nearly 10,000 with college degrees or higher.

In other words, the location of Sixteenth Street near some poor neighborhoods can mislead the first glance to think that its possibilities are few. Part of what Pastor Price is leading his flock to do is to begin to look beyond the visual immediacy of their location and to see the enormous possibilities that are close by. Outreach and development of those possibilities will be a tremendous challenge, but that is a decision of the church, not a limiting factor of the environment.

As I thought about the church I considered the visual experience of the sanctuary and building and what I felt in walking through it. The first impression is outside—its elegance and beauty that define it as a traditional church.

Second, the bombing is ever present. The Wales window in the sanctuary at the back, a gift from the people of Wales and a stained glass artist, is a weekly reminder of that event and its pivotal significance.²⁰ The fellowship hall has, adjacent, a memorial area with photographs and the famous clock frozen in that moment. The sanctuary still has the famous window of Christ knocking on the door, from which the face of Jesus was blown out by the explosion. As you walk out of the church, you see Kelly Ingram Park, from which the marchers in 1963 staged their protests. Next to it is the Civil Rights Institute.

The church is inescapably linked to that history. This has created some positives, of course—recognition, political access, and so forth. Its pastors through the years have automatically been included as within the “inner circle” of city and cultural politics and

²⁰ Hamlin, 63-65.

events. This sometimes brings hidden expectations about the role the pastor will play in community events.

As an “outsider,” Arthur Price has said that he doesn’t know all the “players” in town. His focus on building up the church has meant that he has not always been as highly participative in city politics and events as some predecessors have been. One of the leadership challenges he faces is how to integrate the two—building up the evangelical witness, ministry and missions of the church, and yet still embracing this social witness identity of the church that is pervasive.

Visually, internally and emotionally, the church never escapes that self-understanding. Therefore, it will be challenging to complement that identity.

Beyond these obvious challenges, though, may be the ones that are less so. A biblical image that came to me during this study was from Acts 1:15, when the remaining followers of Jesus were gathered in Jerusalem, waiting for the promise Jesus had given them of the Spirit. The verse says, “together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons.” This is an extraordinary aside—after three years of ministry, a cross and resurrection, Jesus’ movement gathered and it was 120 strong. They faced a changing empire, a struggling Israel, a pagan culture that at best would be indifferent to them, and a new message that they themselves were still struggling to apprehend. Yet history says that this band, after Pentecost, moved forward to spread the Christian gospel across the Roman Empire and indeed would one day supplant that empire with itself.

Theologically, Sixteenth Street Baptist is deeply rooted in a theology of the Cross, at least historically and visually. Its recent pastors, including Arthur Price, have seen the need to sound themes of the Spirit, of Easter, of hope, and of new beginnings. This image of a church between an extraordinary sequence and an uncertain future make, for me, an interesting biblical and theological image for reflection about the church.

I have attended a number of events at the church over the years. I have eaten in the fellowship hall, fed by smiling members. There is yet a wonderful vitality in the people who love and believe in this church. Their possibilities in community are strong. The great questions will be about the pathway to achieve that mission. They will also be about complementing the historic significance and social action heritage of the church without losing it.

Our conversations and readings about leadership have been very helpful to both of us. If I have become too comfortable with a stable, financially secure suburban setting, Arthur reminds me of the entrepreneurial spirit that leadership requires. My church is one of high process, rich in leadership talent, and education. Yet the challenges always exist—how to marshal this toward the calling God has for us.

Arthur has appreciated seeing the process, facilities and meeting the leaders of the church. He recognizes the need for more infrastructure and trained leadership where he is. Our friendship has provided him someone to talk with about how we “do” this or that. I have appreciated from him, though, the dogged determination to lead with clarity and strength. I believe Arthur’s self-understanding of himself as more “Pauline” in his style is a good fit for the challenges ahead for both he and the church.

They are facing many transitions—from a church led by a generation that knew September 15, 1963 to those for whom it is a historical and identity fact; from a traditional downtown church to a “church on mission” in its changed community; from historical landmark to a vibrant, renewed congregation. They have some interesting possibilities. Even the challenges have very positive possibilities.

We have enjoyed our friendship and intend to keep it. We are discussing ways to make our friendship broader—between our congregations and their leaders, so their can be more sharing of “best practices,” and gaining some strengths and connections from each other. Such friendships could not only be good for us and our churches—they could be valuable for the larger city, which continues to live out a disconnected though not unfriendly reality. The future of Birmingham and Alabama demand a different kind of leadership and unity than we have to this point known. Hopefully, the churches can model this new reality by sharing together in common faith, common vitality, and common good.

One last observation brings me back to the metaphor of windows. I have spoken several times of the stained glass in the sanctuary. Stained glass is an ancient art, but it reached its peak in the medieval period. At least one of its functions was to help the church tell the biblical story to an illiterate populace.

Another striking contrast in our congregations is in our windows. Sixteenth looks out on the world through its stained glass. Those windows are both comforting insulation

and theological filters that help them, always, see the light through something that was significant in their lives.

Vestavia Hills Baptist Church is only fifty years old. It sits on a mountaintop from which the tallest buildings of Birmingham can only be seen at their very tops, across Red Mountain in the distance. Its sanctuary was built in 1969 and a large iron cross affixed to the back of the sanctuary, facing off the mountain, symbolizing the steel industry that built Birmingham and facing the downtown city, to indicate the commitment of the church to the city and its needs.

Another striking aspect of Vestavia Hills Baptist's architecture is its incorporation of natural beauty. There is little stained glass there, only a few panels. The main windows are clear, looking out on the spectacular natural beauty off the mountain.

Our churches could benefit from looking at each others' windows. Vestavia Hills is a symbol of the suburban churches whose members need to look through the Wales Window and Christ knocking at the door to understand more deeply who our friends and neighbors are and what our own history has been. But Sixteenth Street can also profit from a window or two that looks clearly out onto its neighborhood and the enormous possibilities that are yet present. There is a vibrant and living community nearby to be reached. They have a strong young leader who wants to help them go to that community. They have many wonderful lay leaders and a mixture of new and longtime members. If their windows strongly symbolize their "two stories" of the past, then a symbolic clear window might be a fitting image of their future, one that will, at last, take them "beyond" rather than merely "behind" the stained glass.