

# Living as the Body of Christ in Urban Indianapolis



*The Urban Calling of Redeemer Presbyterian Church*



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Front Cover – Art courtesy of Jason Dorsey

Rear Cover – Archive photos of First Presbyterian’s foundation being built and a worship service being held atop the new foundation. That building is now the home of Redeemer.

## **Introduction:**

Attend Redeemer Presbyterian Church for any length of time, and you'll likely hear our unofficial rallying cry, that we're "in the city, for the city." Being situated geographically at the busy intersection of 16<sup>th</sup> and Delaware St., "in the city" makes perfect sense. But what does it mean to be "for the city?" As Redeemer members now come from urban, suburban and even rural settings, it's a question we take seriously as we seek to live out the Gospel. The Redeemer Session (board of elders) has written the following document, which is intended to provide congregational guidance on pursuing Redeemer's calling to serve the city.

We also want to acknowledge that in the past, we here at Redeemer have been guilty of judging people based on where they live. With this document, we make a public, accountable commitment to stop doing that. It is not right.

Our focus, mission and calling is the Center Township of Indianapolis; what we call the "city." If you do not live in this area, all this means is that we feel called by God to focus our resources on ministering to this area of the city. We are all called to minister where we are, and so, that is what we are doing, the best we can and with God's help. We hope you do it with us, regardless of where you live or come from.

## Executive Summary:

Redeemer Presbyterian Church believes it is called to be “in the city, for the city.” Our mission of “unleashing a movement of the Gospel that will transform the city of Indianapolis spiritually, socially, and culturally” calls our members to embrace and care for the city in which we are citizens. Our congregation seeks a relationship with the city that is embodied through our daily lives, both communally and individually. This document is intended to provide congregational guidance on how to pursue this calling.

Redeemer’s theological framework has very practical implications for how we use its resources and encourage one another to spend our time, gifts, passions and money. We have been rescued from our sin by the blood of Christ, which gives us the freedom and power to share our love and gifts with the city around us. It does not mean the church needs to directly take on all urban challenges, but must encourage its members to engage wholeheartedly in using the resources we are given to benefit the common good. God’s call on most of our members may be to spend their volunteer time outside of the church, rather than absorbing them into ever-growing church “programs.” Redeemer has intentionally limited the number of its own programs to allow members to engage actively in the life of the larger community.

While Gospel-centered worship is the center of the Redeemer community, this worship must result in tangible love for our neighbors. We believe that every member of the Redeemer community should engage in rebuilding the city in some manner. This can be through one of or a combination of the following acts:

- *Reconciliation*: Working to heal the conflicts and wounds of the city
- *Rebuilding*: Giving your work and resources to serve the common good of the city
- *Relocation*: Intentionally living in the city

We also make the following resolutions regarding engaging in the city:

- To live in Gospel community
- To make Christ the only stumbling block
- To live as a broken and confessing people
- To practice Christian hospitality
- To be in the world but not of the world
- To grow in our understanding of Scripture
- To live as if our work matters and lasts
- To all be ministers of God’s mercy and justice
- To make worship the center and core of our life

While we know Indianapolis will never achieve the ideal urban life (this is only found in the New Jerusalem), we believe God has offered common grace and a call to His people to work to bring about His kingdom in this city here and now through our faithful presence. Redeemer will encourage our congregation to seek the good of our city with this vision and hope guiding the church, how we make individual family life choices and even the mundane decisions of daily life in the City. Our life together will draw on the power of the Gospel so we can share our strength with our neighbors for the good of all.

# **Living as the Body of Christ in Urban Indianapolis**

## *The Urban Calling of Redeemer Presbyterian Church*

Redeemer Presbyterian Church believes it is called to be “in the city, for the city.” Our mission of “unleashing a movement of the Gospel that will transform the city of Indianapolis spiritually, socially, and culturally” calls our members to embrace and care for the city in which we are citizens. We have been rescued from our sin by the blood of Christ, which gives us the freedom and power to share our love and gifts with the city around us. Our congregation seeks a relationship with the city that is embodied through our daily lives, both communally and individually.

### **1. A Theological Framework for Engaging the City**

Redeemer seeks to be faithful to the cultural mandate of historic Christianity. Our faith has both spiritual and physical implications; the Gospel calls us to live out a “public” faith in all aspects of life, especially in how we participate in the life of our community. We are called to use the truth, gifts and resources we have been given to push back the forces of evil and encourage a way of life that foreshadows the future glory of God’s kingdom. This approach to living is described by the prophet Jeremiah to God’s people living in exile among the Gentiles:

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:4-7)*

This passage instructed God’s people not to be nostalgic for the pre-captivity past that could not be recovered. He also didn’t promise a quick end to captivity, but encouraged them to settle in for a long-term life in Babylon. They were not to be hostile, defensive or withdrawn from their captors, nor were they to be absorbed or assimilated into the culture around them. Instead they were instructed to be a “faithful presence” in Babylon. That is, they were to remain faithful to their identity in God, but be fully present in the life of Babylon by serving its common good.

We believe this passage is particularly relevant to the life of Redeemer in urban Indianapolis. For we know that although our true home is the New Jerusalem, the eternal city of God where we will live forever when Jesus returns, we live now as exiles in a land of exile. We do not live in a Christian culture but are called to live in a post-Christian community facing major social challenges without a common belief system from which to address them. Jeremiah, as well as the New Testament’s instructions to “look to each other’s interests and not merely to your own,” (Philippians 2:4) push us to be committed to the city in which we reside in exile, even when it is indifferent, hostile or ungrateful. Since we are exiles, we are not seeking power to return to some mythical Christian culture of the past but to live faithfully in our exile.

We are also to resist the temptation to withdraw from the culture around us and live private Christian lives of isolation. Instead, we are called to be a faithful presence in our city by sharing the physical and spiritual blessings of our faith through our work and relationships.

Since we are exiles ultimately destined to find our home in the perfect “New Jerusalem,” we should practice “incarnational urbanism” today by serving as a faithful presence within our community. Our lives in Indianapolis are not about gratifying our own desires, but building a society where we can share together the gifts God has given believers in a new “common good” of shared community health. We are called to live as public Christians, applying our faith openly and actively by creating beauty and advancing truth and justice, for the blessing of both Christians and our unbelieving neighbors. We believe that Christ has broken the “powers and principalities” that foster evil systems in the world so we have hope that the brokenness and pain around us actually can be defeated by actions motivated by grace. We believe that God’s kingdom is already real here, but not yet fully realized. This will motivate us to bring re-birth to many aspects of city life, including social justice, the arts, neighborhood revitalization, government, medicine, the environment, economic development, sustainable foods and education.

## **2. Why Redeemer is Called to Serve Urban Indianapolis**

Redeemer’s call to serve the urban core of Indianapolis must be shaped by the unique history and challenge of this place. The core neighborhoods surrounding Redeemer are the birthplace of the entire metropolitan area and still the home of government, important cultural institutions and many of the economic drivers of our regional economy. Sadly, this birthplace of Indianapolis has lost its own vitality while still supporting the growth of the larger metro area. Between 1960 and 2010, Center Township of Marion County (where Redeemer is located) lost more than 65 percent of its population, and continues to shrink at a rapid rate.

While Redeemer’s immediate neighborhood has experienced renewal, its larger urban context is decaying. An increasing amount of center city property is either utilized by non-taxable entities or is sitting vacant, greatly reducing the tax revenues necessary to support essential public services. Since most people who left Indianapolis over the past 50 years were blue collar and middle class, the remaining population is increasingly isolated in low-income neighborhoods.. Even the recent influx of professionals into downtown is insufficient to compensate for the depopulation and poverty of surrounding neighborhoods caused by the rapid loss of blue-collar homeowners. This dynamic increases the costs of public safety, healthcare and education that must be supported by fewer taxpayers. This in turn drives up tax rates and further accelerates the exit of blue-collar residents from the city while further isolating the poor.

The decline of urban neighborhoods weakens the social fabric that the poor rely on to live a decent life. Fleeing homeowners are replaced by transient renters who seldom care for their property or community. Crime goes up and kids turn to gangs for protection while elderly residents become prisoners in their own homes. Employers leave neighborhoods,

making it harder for people without cars to find jobs and support traditional families. Grocery stores shut down, leaving residents without access to affordable healthy food and contributing to related health problems. Children growing up in overwhelmingly poor neighborhoods see few positive role models, and declining schools fail to equip them for seizing opportunities. School system performance decreases as the percentage of poor and transient students increases and parental involvement plummets, resulting in high dropout rates. The poor in these isolated neighborhoods often lose hope that things can ever get better, so they come to accept and even protect the failed systems around them. Many urban families have lived in isolated poverty for so long that they have become “socially poor,” lacking the personal or community support necessary to take advantage of opportunities to improve their lives.

While urban decline has damaged our city and its vulnerable residents, Christians living together in urban Indianapolis have the opportunity to renew city culture as creators, workers and leaders in all walks of life. The grace we have experienced will not allow us to ignore the challenges of our city, but calls us to restore our community. Decades of urban decline have produced neighborhoods where a small but determined group of believers can renew real hope for the future of the community and its residents. The city needs Christians, and the Gospel gives us the power to work redemptively in all areas of life.

### **3. Our Resolutions in Engaging the City**

We will only be able to live faithfully among the tensions and challenges of urban life if we have a source of power beyond ourselves. This power is found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which St. Paul states is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The following resolutions seek to bind us to the Gospel *and* articulate the way of life it creates in those who believe. Without the power of the Gospel we would not be able to be faithfully present within our city.

***We resolve to live in Gospel community.*** Against the autonomy of our age, we resolve to live in intentional Gospel community. Our lives are no longer our own; we belong to each other (Romans 12:5). In Jesus we are one body. We need one another and cannot live on our own (1 Corinthians 12:12ff). In the presence of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we experience His very physical presence. Consequently, we believe that sharing life together in our community groups, and, when possible, living together in neighborhoods throughout our city is a physical expression of the spiritual reality that the Church is the fullness of Christ, and that we are Christ to one another and to the world when we are together (Ephesians 4:11-13). By God’s grace we resolve to practice intentional community across generations and traditional social boundaries (Ephesians 4:1-16).

***We resolve to make Christ the only stumbling block.*** Against making any secondary identities such as race, age, gender, socio-economic status, political affinity or home address our church’s identity, we resolve to be bound together only by the story of Jesus Christ. As a church we do not hold any other identity but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2), yet we connect with all identities. We have become all things to all men and women so that we may win all to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19ff). We joyfully

work arm in arm with our non-believing neighbors. At the same time we are not silent in identifying and naming Jesus as the real object of their longing as they desire for peace and want to help the poor (Philippians 2:14-15, 1 Corinthians 1:23). By God's grace, we resolve to shine like stars as we hold out the word of life (Philippians 2:15).

***We resolve to live as a broken and confessing people.*** Against all self-righteous pride and the subterfuges of shame, we resolve to boldly confess our sins to one another (James 5:16, 1 John 1:9). We are empowered to confess our sins in the freedom that comes through God's unconditional rescue of us through Jesus. As we grow secure in God's love and acceptance in Jesus Christ, we are able to live authentically, transparently and humbly, ready to admit our wrong and share our weaknesses, living before each other as we really are: moral wrecks in need of a savior. By God's grace, we resolve not to pretend we have it all together, but rather to walk in the light and so have fellowship with one another as broken sinners being healed by the grace of Christ (1 John 1:5).

***We resolve to practice Christian hospitality.*** Against the spirit of self-absorption and self-protection, we resolve to practice Christian hospitality (Romans 12:13). This includes opening our church and homes and sharing our broken lives not only with our friends but also with those in need, the weak and marginalized, the aliens and the strangers of our city (Luke 10:30-35). We practice Christian hospitality in our corporate worship where we seek to create a safe place for people to belong among us before they believe as we do. We also call our people to express hospitality in their homes and not just in the building owned by the church. Our daily home life is often the best place to incorporate "widows and orphans" into life-changing Christian community. Generations have grown up without fully embracing the ancient practice of Christian hospitality. We resolve to seek reform and grow into the practice of robust Christian hospitality, and teach this to our children and others. By God's grace, as He has welcomed us into His family, so we resolve to welcome people into our church, homes and families (Hebrews 13:1).

***We resolve to be in the world but not of the world.*** Against the opposite poles of fleeing from the brokenness and needs of the city or of accommodating to the spirit and culture of the city, we resolve to be in the city but not of it (John 17:14). Christ calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, to serve our city and not to retreat from it. So we gladly share solidarity in the suffering and struggles of our neighbors and work alongside them for the city's peace and prosperity (Jeremiah 29:11). In practice, this means in our ministry we try to use common community spaces or share our own facility with others. As St. Paul did in his sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-34), we work to understand our culture and affirm the common ground we share with our non-believing friends, neighbors and associates. At the same time, we seek to be renewed and transformed by the Gospel so that we are not conformed to the "spirit of the age" (Romans 12:1-2). By God's grace, we resolve to be a countercultural "city within the city," living and working for the common good of our city and, ultimately, for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:32).

***We resolve to grow in our understanding of Scripture.*** Against all moralistic and law-reliant approaches to Scripture, we resolve to glory in Christ as the center and fulfillment of Scripture, the capstone in which the whole building is held together (Ephesians 2:19, Romans 3:21). We are committed to daily reliance on Jesus, who is our savior, the author and sustainer of our faith, and the end to which all of us live. So we resolve to read and meditate on Scripture, to listen to it read and hear it preached, because all of the law and prophets, all of Scripture testifies to Him who is our life (Luke 24:13ff). Because we want to know Jesus and become strong in our faith and rooted in Him, we are committed to the daily study of God's word so that we might rejoice in Christ as He is revealed to us in His word (John 5:39-40). Without God's word we have no spiritual food or root, and we wither (Psalm 1). By God's grace we will grow in our understanding of Scripture and so know the mind of Christ and by faith, live lives pleasing to God our Father.

***We resolve to live as if our work matters and lasts.*** Against the secular beliefs of the meaninglessness of one's life and work, or poor interpretations of the judgment of the present world, we resolve to live and work in light of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21-22). Jesus says "I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). With the resurrection of Christ, God has begun to reclaim and redeem all that is His. Just as our physical bodies will be redeemed and glorified at the resurrection, so also we believe the true and beautiful things of the world are already becoming part of the new heavens (Revelation 21:24) This is illustrated in Isaiah where the New Jerusalem is described as having the best cultural achievements of the known nations incorporated into its glory (Isaiah 60). Therefore, what we do in the city and in our neighborhoods is somehow lasting and eternal. Our vocations and our reweaving of neighborhoods are part of our mission as new creations, as ambassadors of God's kingdom. By God's grace, we will work with Christian distinctiveness and excellence in our neighborhoods, in the marketplace and in our vocations.

***We resolve to all be ministers of God's mercy and justice.*** God has poured His love into our hearts by His Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). In light of God's love and mercy, we are to be a people of love and mercy (Romans 12:1). The Church is called to bring mercy and justice to the poor and helpless, the widow and orphan, the alien and the stranger, not leaving this work solely to secular organizations and the government (James 1:27). It is important to point out that doing mercy and justice is not just the work of the staff or deacon team; it is to be owned by all Christians. We are called to directly serve the poor in their daily life, as well as where they choose to invest their community service. We are to be generous as God has been generous to us. This includes charity to the poor, but much more, too. It means the sharing of our lives. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, it is to "spend oneself," literally to pour out one's soul for those in need (Isaiah 58:10). When we care for the weak, poor and marginalized, when we feed the hungry and visit those in prison, we care for, feed and visit Jesus (Matthew 25:31ff). By God's grace, we resolve to actively listen to the Spirit of God as He prompts us to step into the distress of others and spend ourselves in acts of mercy and justice as we care for them and fight systems of injustice and oppression.

*We resolve to make worship the center and core of our life.* Against the idea that our spirituality is a private affair, we resolve to be defined by our corporate worship. In worship, God calls us together as His people and into His presence. We lift up our hearts and praise and worship Him, and bow before Him in confession. He assures us of His forgiveness and reminds us of our holy and blameless status in His sight. He speaks His word to us, and comforts and challenges us through the preaching of His word. Finally, He invites us to His table and sends us out into the city with His benediction. Thus, our gathered worship is the core activity of our life in the city. It defines, motivates and renews us. Worship spills out into all other aspects of life. Through worship the hold of idols (sex, money, approval, power, reputation, etc.) in our life is broken and we are re-centered in God. Our gathered worship provides the foundation and source of strength for our engagement in our city. It nurtures us as individual worshippers of God and motivates us to worship God in our families. Ultimately, worship reminds us that all we do is to be done to God's glory. By God's grace, we resolve to be worshippers of God, and to make our life and service in the city a form of sacramental worship.

#### **4. Redeemer's Call to Action**

Redeemer's theological framework has very practical implications for how we use its resources and encourage one another to spend our time, gifts, passions and money. It does not mean the church must directly take on all urban challenges, but must encourage its members to engage wholeheartedly in using the resources they are given to benefit the common good. God's call on most of our members may be to spend their volunteer time outside of the church, rather than absorbing them into ever-growing church "programs." Redeemer has intentionally limited the number of its own programs to allow its members to engage actively in the life of the larger community.

The church can choose to tailor its size and ministry activities to fit the scale of the building and neighborhood where it is located rather than moving or taking over more space to accommodate continued growth. As growth continues, the congregation will plant churches in other neighborhoods or support the growth of sister congregations in order to be a good neighbor. We hope to instill a strong commitment to serving the neighborhood in each of these future church plants, and will seek to locate these plants in areas where they are needed for neighborhood renewal. Redeemer also feels a particular call to serve artists and designers due to our unique partnership with the Harrison Center for the Arts. We will mobilize our community to bring Shalom to the often-difficult world of the local arts and the lives of individual artists. These and many other decisions impacting our engagement with our community will be driven by the motivation of being a blessing to our neighbors rather than an abrasive burden or an isolated institution.

While worship is the center of the Redeemer community, we believe that this worship must result in tangible love for our neighbors. We believe that every member of the Redeemer community should engage with rebuilding the city in some manner. This can be through working in the city, giving time in service to the city, intentionally living in the city or some combination of these acts. While not all members are called to live in the city, we believe that both the health of the church community and its positive impact on the city around it is most fully realized when we live in close proximity to each other.

Believers living close together in a neighborhood will be able to encourage and support each other and band together to serve their neighbors. Cohesive bands of members living in community will have the spiritual, financial and time resources to embrace neighbors with extreme challenges. Living together in community will promote deeper love for each other and for their neighborhoods, but care should be taken to discourage any sense of self-righteousness toward members who do not choose to live in the city. The practical implications of this call will be different in each member's life, and we are called to show extreme grace in allowing each member to apply this mission to their own life with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

More broadly, this call to serve the city can be framed in terms of “three Rs” of action: *Reconcile*, *Rebuild* and *Relocate*.

To *Reconcile* is to make a deliberate effort to heal the conflicts of the city by building relationships where the gospel of God's grace can be introduced, lived out and applied to healing hatred and suspicion.

To *Rebuild* is to focus on using our work and resources to bring hope, healing, and opportunity to our city in the form of things like education, economy, transportation and other areas of public life.

To *Relocate* is to make the choice to move into the city in order to more organically invest in its neighborhoods and deepen our relationships with each other.

Again, the outworking of this call will look different in each member's life, and we are called to exhibit grace as each applies this mission to their own life.. We encourage the congregation to explore their own call by getting to know each other and our overlapping networks of engagement with neighbors, organizations and ideas.

While we know that Indianapolis will never achieve the ideal urban life (we look forward to the New Jerusalem), we also believe that God has offered common grace and a call to His people to work to bring about His kingdom in this city here and now through our faithful presence. Redeemer will encourage its congregation to seek the good of our city with this vision and hope guiding the church, how we make individual family life choices and even the mundane decisions of daily life in the city. Our life together will draw on the power of the Gospel so we can share our strength with our neighbors for the good of all.

