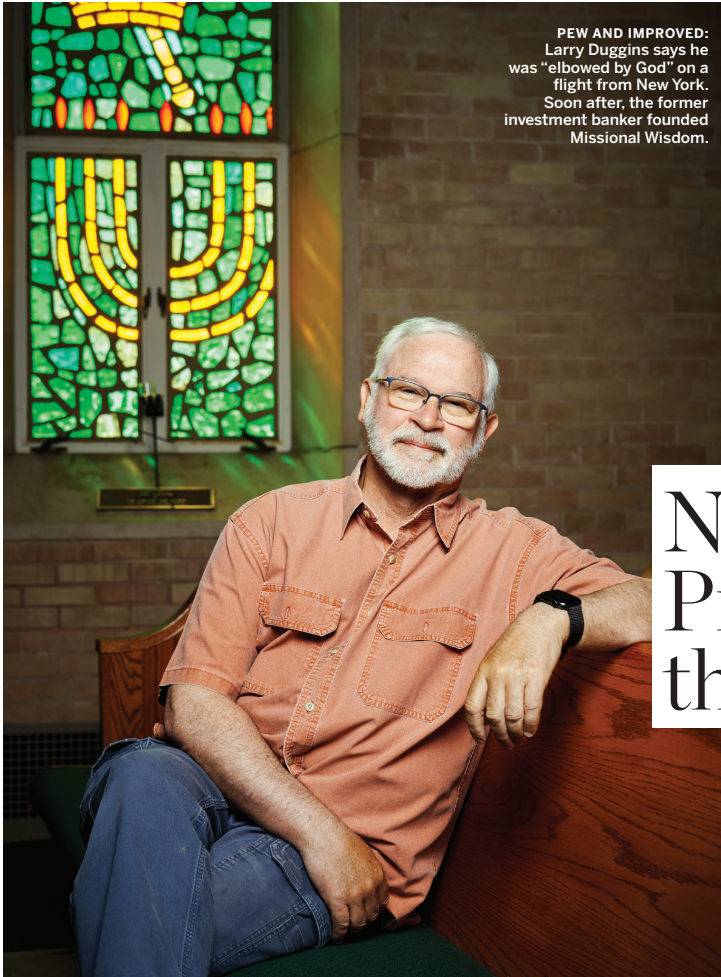


CHURCHES



PEW AND IMPROVED: Larry Duggins says he was “elbowed by God” on a flight from New York. Soon after, the former investment banker founded Missional Wisdom.

No Longer Preaching to the Choir

Missional Wisdom Foundation still wants people to gather at churches—but for coffee or yoga or maybe even beekeeping instead of Sunday services.

BY MARK DENT

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ITCHELL BOONE WORKS AS PASTOR OF WHITE ROCK UNITED METHODIST Church, his first job after seminary and traveling the world. “I actually applied to Iliff School of Theology from an internet cafe in Bangkok,” he says. The 34-year-old has a scraggly auburn beard and lets his chest hair peek over the top of button-up shirts. He keeps one record player in his office and two more in another office for staff. (They listen to a lot of Bob Dylan.) He is the type of guy who thinks East Dallas feels a bit like Austin. And he is glad it does.

In other words, Boone was the perfect partner for Southlake-based Missional Wisdom Foundation’s grand experiment to save struggling area churches by filling them with activities and businesses that have absolutely nothing to do with traditional Christianity. White Rock UMC, on its deathbed a few years ago, now houses a bustling co-working space in its basement, a florist, an empowerment initiative based around sewing, a dance studio, and a Buddhist Zendo. It used to have an aerial yoga studio, Yoga Up, until the owner’s customer base outgrew the space.

“All these things we’re doing at White Rock are deliberately over the top,” says Larry Duggins, co-founder of Missional Wisdom. “We’re

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doing a bunch of different stuff in one place so that we can bring people to it and have it spark their imagination.”

Just as startups have remade transportation with ride-sharing, dating with swiping, and downtime with binge-watching, Missional Wisdom is bringing an ethos of disruption to struggling, change-resistant churches. Missional Wisdom’s churches of the future will have coffee shops, workspaces, exercise rooms, beehives (as a

Missional Wisdom partner in North Carolina does)—whatever amenities attract and sustain their communities while giving the churches new revenue streams.

The ideas are drawing national attention. But if replacing worshippers with beekeepers sounds odd to you, you’re not the only skeptic. Boone notes the bishop overseeing White Rock UMC didn’t believe the plan would work. Plenty of other hard-line Christians have expressed reservations.

That said, almost none of them have offered alternatives, and, Boone says, “we were going to close the church anyway.”

Traditional Christianity is in peril—even in Dallas, the designer buckle of the Bible Belt. Between 1980 and 2010, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives, the number of Dallas County Methodists declined by 15.9 percent, Presbyterians by 26 percent, and Southern Baptists by 6 percent. The number of Southern Baptist churches increased, but 64 Methodist and Presbyterian churches have closed since 1980. Only Catholics, Mormons, and smaller Evangelical groups have seen significant gains. These declines have come at a time when North Texas’ population has grown by 52 percent. The religions are reeling from a growing number of nonbelievers—*cough*millennials*cough*—and the loss of a wealthy, white base to the suburbs, where megachurches—mostly nondenominational congregations helmed by talking-head pastors and overproduced services—still bring in crowds reaching into the tens of thousands.

Duggins, a middle-aged former investment banker, made the church’s future a focal point of his studies at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology, even though he was the gray-haired elder in a class of twentysomethings. He enrolled in 2008 after being “elbowed by God” on a third cramped flight back from New York in one week. “That was in March. I stopped working for that company in June. I was at Perkins School of Theology in August,” Duggins says. “It was really clear for me.” On a trip to Scotland to learn about monastic life and Celtic spirituality, Duggins met Elaine Heath, an SMU theology professor who would go on to a two-year stint as dean of Duke Divinity School. She had recently started a “house church” inside a Vickery Meadow apartment, where refugees and SMU students met for worship and meals. Heath found that the relationships cultivated were just as important as the worship. She and the students organized soccer games and assisted in landlord disputes and embedded themselves in the neighborhood. The refugees, who may as well have been invisible to the traditional churches in the area, felt a real connection.

Not long after they met, Duggins and Heath launched the nonprofit Missional Wisdom. Realizing Sunday church no longer drew a community as it did during the latter half of the 20th century, they aimed to act as consultants to traditional churches and prod them to introduce activ-



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ities and services that lead people to gather.

“In terms of the mission of the church, it’s not a huge shift,” Duggins says. “It’s going back to the fundamental [aspect] of we want people to draw together in God’s name. Nothing that’s in the Gospels I’ve read says they have to do that on Sunday morning with a red hymnal. Sorry. We’ll do that with other ways. And it works.”

They found an ideal partner in White Rock UMC and Boone. When he arrived, in 2012, White Rock’s last 120 members had recently held a vote to keep the congregation alive after declining from a peak of 3,500 members in the 1960s. It was grim. “We had a consulting study in 2002, and they told us we were the oldest congregation they ever encountered,” says Ken Mooter, a congregant since 1962. “That 60 percent of us were over 60 and ... statistically half of us would be dead by 2010.” The church, located in a 58,000-square-foot building, cost \$700,000 a year to run. Donations totaled \$320,000 annually. Other than the sanctuary on Sunday morning, the building went unused.

So Boone started by turning a portion of the parking lot into a community garden.

By 2016, he had teamed up with Missional Wisdom and given the entire property a makeover, punctuated by a co-working space called The Mix. Missional Wisdom operates The Mix and shares revenue with White Rock UMC. The digs aren’t as fancy as co-working setups elsewhere, but the price—\$150 a month for a full-time membership—is more affordable.

And they don’t bring up God to people who come to work or attend events. The less involvement of traditional religion the better. “At first people said, ‘Oh, you’re in a church,’” says Rhonda Sweet, community conduit at The Mix. “But when they step in the building or step in the space, it feels nothing like a church. It’s such a different vibe here.” Boone calls it “soft evangelism.” Or, in layman’s terms, backing off. The goal is engagement with the community and survival for the church. The size of a congregation may grow—White Rock’s has increased to about 220—but only as a byproduct. “It’s not like we have a co-working space and you have to say the name Jesus to get in the door,” Heath says. “That’s what we’re trying to get away from.”

Dozens of area churches have reached out to Boone, Heath, and Duggins for advice, and a few have already gotten started with their own transformations. Oak Lawn United Methodist Church will soon house Union Coffee’s new location. Central Christian, the oldest Protestant congregation in Dallas, has a dog park, a co-working space called SyncLife that opened last year, and bigger plans for the future. Ken Crawford, the pastor, says that the Central Christian campus is starting to be known as Central Westside. The motto is “a hub of community engagement, innovation, and impact.”

A new wellness center with a yoga studio is in the works. Crawford and the owner were discussing details early this year. He says it’ll be a perfect setup: the studio will go on the second floor; the women and men coming for yoga can use a parking lot adjacent to the dog park and enter through a backdoor.

They may not even realize they’re walking into a church. **D**

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