

A parallel start in New Orleans

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

On a recent mission trip to New Orleans, I visited Carrollton United Methodist Church, where two brand-new pastors are dreaming of a new venture: a parallel start.

My group was visiting a senior center that is housed at Carrollton each day, providing lunch and classes in sewing, Spanish language, tai chi, and more. Guests play Bingo and lounge in the church's windowed breezeway when the programs are over.

But the senior center is now the most significant ministry occurring at the Carrollton church. A couple of small nonprofits share the building, and they once built showers to host workers who came for Katrina clean-up. But now the worship community is down to about 30 people and there is a sense that the building is haunted by its own unfinished business: how to be vital not just as a community gathering place, but as a church.

So the United Methodist Church has infused this congregation with funds to hire two new full-time pastors, Sione and Billy, who had both started working there the day before we arrived. These two have the task of maintaining the current organizations in the building *and* launching a new church development there at the same time. That's sometimes called a parallel church start.

There is not much out there to read about parallel church starts. There's [this article from the Episcopal tradition](#), though it's a bit outdated. More recently, [this Disciples of Christ newsletter](#) mentions a parallel start project in Washington state. If you have more examples of parallel starts, please include them in the comments.

In New Orleans, our hosts gave us a tour of their meandering building, which in some parts still has the lingering odor of standing flood waters. Its rooms are a

mixture of forlorn memories and promising potential. A large parlor will be used for worship by the older congregation. The hall has been used for children's programs, but badly needs a facelift and some blades for the ceiling fans. There seemed to be kitchens everywhere we turned, including one in a closet, but none of them looked fit for preparing a large meal.

In every room, the two new pastors saw hope. They were imagining how the rooms could be repaired, revived and filled with new ministry, the way Jeremiah did when he imagined a future for his fallen city:

Thus says the Lord:

I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob,

and have compassion on his dwellings;

the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound,

and the citadel set on its rightful site (30:18).

There is no way to move forward in these times except with bold imagination. But a little money really helps, too! Kudos to the UMC for investing in the future with these two ambitious leaders. May God bless them with a future and hope.

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