

Saturday "Sermon"

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Staying Warm

A week or so ago, a pastor friend said to me, "I've heard about you guys at First Baptist working on something called a 'Ministry Mall.' What's up?" I was glad he asked, and it occurs to me that others might also be interested in knowing what's going on.

Nearly ten years ago, First Baptist bought the former Carolyn Manufacturing building that sits between our church and the train station, hoping to turn it into a youth center. Unfortunately, the building proved unsuitable for that purpose, and it has sat empty now for over five years.

Then, more than two years ago, several groups that provide social services and Christian ministry around town approached our church, wondering whether the facility might be turned to other ministry-related purposes. Those conversations have continued, and a month or so ago, an independent, non-profit board was established for the purpose of designing, funding, and constructing a "Bristol Ministry Mall" as an expression of collective and cooperative ministry by the Christian community in Bristol.

Dr. Tom Makres is Chair of this Board, currently made up of representatives from First Baptist, Bristol Faith in Action, and the Bristol Emergency Food Pantry. The plan is for First Baptist to lease the property to the Mall Board for a token amount, and for a building to be constructed that meets the growing needs of Bristol Faith in Action, the Food Pantry, and such other Christian ministries as choose to become involved. These ministries would work together with organizations such as The Salvation Army and The Haven of Rest to strengthen the fabric of care in our community.

It's uncertain at this point whether the current building will be renovated or whether it would be better to rebuild. The possibilities are many. Some of the things that occur to me include a second soup kitchen to serve Tennessee residents like the one the United Company operates on the Virginia side; a permanent home for "Bristol Cares"; an apartment that could serve as temporary housing for burned-out or flooded families; a "Center for Marriages & Families"; the list goes on and on!

James, Jesus' brother, wrote these words long ago: "Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, and you say, 'Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well'—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?" (James 2:15-16). As we think about Valentine's Day next week, let's also imagine together what God will do as we join hands and hearts to express love in Jesus' Name, now, and for years to come!