

First Presbyterian pastor Wood to retire

Community leader and outspoken activist, he leaves on a good note.

By Tim Funk



The Revend William Wood, one of Charlotte's longest-serving pastors and a community leader who helped open centers for the city's homeless, has told his congregation at First Presbyterian Church that he plans to retire by the end of the year.

Wood, 66, has led the nearly 200-year-old uptown church since October 1983. He'll give his final sermon at the church on November 21.

"Retirement offers for me an opportunity to continue to minister through teaching, writing, and serving the church in a variety of different ways," Wood wrote in a letter that was expected to arrive in church members' mailboxes Monday.

Over the years, the senior pastor took on other high-profile roles, serving on the boards at Davidson College and the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library. ImaginOn, the children's library and theater, was built when he chaired the library board.

Wood - an Atlanta native and the son of a Presbyterian minister - also was the first chairman of the Urban Ministry Center, which was established in 1993 to serve Charlotte's homeless. First Presbyterian worked with other uptown churches, homeless advocates and business leaders such as Bank of America's Hugh McColl to buy the land and launch the center.

Wood's church also started and, for years, housed A Child's Place, a center for homeless children.

At First Presbyterian, Wood presided over several renovations - including a \$15 million project in 2001 that commissioned artist Ben Long to paint a fresco of The Good Samaritan in the church fellowship hall.

His flock grew in his care

When Wood arrived in Charlotte from Kingsport, Tenn., nearly 27 years ago, the congregation at First Presbyterian stood at 1,200. As he prepares to retire, it's more than 2,200. That growth is a feat for an urban church in a mainline denomination that has been losing members.

Wood has also reached more than 22,000 weekly viewers via WSOC-TV, which airs First Presbyterian's 11 a.m. Sunday service.

In a phone interview with the Observer, Wood said he's leaving at a time when both he and his church are in good health.

"I'm going to turn 67 this summer. It seems like a good time," he said. "The church is doing well... We have a vibrant congregation."

In 1991, members of that congregation stood by Wood, a father of three, when he went through a divorce that could have cost him his job in some other churches.

Wood has also been outspoken at times. As a board member at Davidson, his alma mater, and as an ex-board member, he fought a proposal that eventually allowed the election of non-Christians to the governing body at the school founded by Presbyterians.

And in 2004, when Mecklenburg County commissioner Bill James commented that urban blacks "live in a moral sewer," Wood and the Rev. Steve Shoemaker of Myers Park Baptist Church launched a petition that protested James' remarks and presented it to the county commissioners.

"There are a few moral sewers in south Charlotte as well," Wood told the board, referring to James' district.

Last year, First Presbyterian hosted a series of speakers - including Mayor Anthony Foxx and Duke Energy CEO Jim Rogers - who talked about how Charlotte is changing.

"I think we're at a crossroads now," said Wood, who has had a front-row seat to all the growth that's come to uptown.

Wood, who plans to remain in Charlotte, said the church will begin looking for a new senior pastor in January. Until one is chosen, First Presbyterian is likely to have an interim pastor for six months to a year.