

A Pastor Finds His Church in the City

By FRAN MORELAND JOHNS

AS HE contemplates retirement at the end of January after 16 years as senior minister at Calvary Presbyterian Church, Laird Stuart has a hard time picking highlights. But among his favorite memories of his time at the top of Fillmore Street are events that allowed the church to partner more fully with the community.

"I wanted very much to have Calvary interact with its neighbors," he says, and as soon as he mentions one connection—the open houses during the Fillmore Jazz Festival—he thinks of another—the weekly programs for neighborhood seniors.

For the indefatigable pastor and head of staff of the historic church on the corner of Fillmore and Jackson, the last 16 years have been filled with satisfying activities, many of which helped knit the church ever more indelibly into the life of the neighborhood.

STUART and his wife Virginia met on a blind date on New Year's Eve in 1967 just as he was finishing Princeton Theological Seminary. They were married the following January, and through the years pastored together to Connecticut, New Jersey, Michigan and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before they came to San Francisco in 1993.

"We were hoping to move from a large suburban congregation to a church in a city," he says, "although we thought it would be an east coast city. You never know."

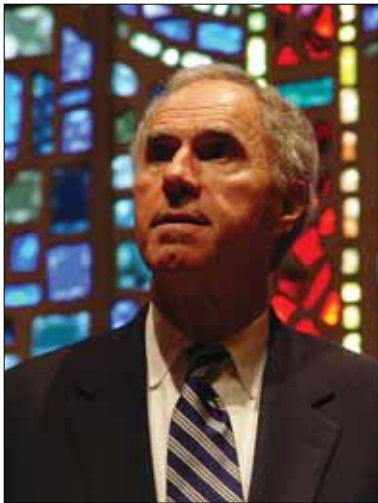
Most Presbyterian pastors tend to last about a decade, but the Stuarts were widely supported and admired at Calvary, and so they stayed on. Then in the fall, Stuart announced he would retire in early 2010.

As the new year approached, the Stuarts were looking forward to a quieter life with their children and grandchildren in a home they have purchased in Sausalito, Michigan, a thriving small town on Lake Michigan with a vibrant arts community.

But their retirement plans were short-circuited just before Christmas when Stuart was named interim president of the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo beginning March 1.

"This was an unexpected development," Stuart says. He had been active in the seminary and served on its board, including two years as chair. "I will be the interim until they find a new president," he says. "They hope that will happen in a year or so."

A MAJOR PROJECT at Calvary during Stuart's pastorate—"I hope it won't be my main legacy," he



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laughs—was the earthquake retrofit the church undertook after the 1989 quake, which came just after a million-dollar renovation had been completed. It took time to raise more money, so a plaque went up outside warning that the building might not survive a major earthquake. Stuart remembers that some parishioners grew fond of the plaque, taking it as a public proclamation of their faith.

Eventually the congregation opted not just to retrofit but to improve, adding safety features and meeting rooms, and creating an atrium that exposes the old bricks carefully marked and brought from Calvary's earlier location on Union Square, where the St. Francis Hotel now stands.

The lofty sanctuary, with its excellent acoustics, is often used for concerts and special events in addition to regular worship services. And many public and community meetings are also held at Calvary. It

has become, in many respects, a civic meeting grounds for Pacific Heights.

"Calvary is a Christ centered, biblically based, socially progressive church," Stuart says. "It is not a church that excludes, but a church committed to justice and kindness."

Gender equality has always been among the things for which the Stuarts worked, both locally and in the wider world. Calvary's congregation includes a broad range of views but has tended to blaze its own trails, so it has been a good fit for Stuart's leadership. In 1978, the church called Deborah Wright as associate pastor—the first woman pastor in San Francisco and the first associate for a major U.S. Presbyterian congregation.

A dozen years later, the struggle was not for women's rights but for the rights of gays and lesbians. It is a struggle that continues still, and one in which Stuart remains a

leading advocate of inclusion, both locally and nationally.

"When the denomination voted for the first time on the issue, we had a small group draft a statement as to why we want to be an inclusive church," he says. "It was approved by the session [the church's governing body] and presented to the congregation in an open discussion."

THE OUTCOME was uncertain. "We had no idea how it would go," he says. "But it was a great moment. I was proud of the congregation, and grateful for the indication that they were behind me."

During the AIDS pandemic in the 1990s, Calvary's HIV support group—in which both Stuart and his wife Gini were active—ministered to many people, both church members and others from the community, who were suffering from AIDS.

Such stands have not always met with acclaim.

"Once when I preached about the war in Iraq," Stuart says, "one listener left with a parting comment at the door: 'I'm never coming back.'"

Responses of this kind exemplify "a kind of rigidity, an intolerance of differing points of view," that Stuart says he is sad to find becoming more prevalent.

"Particularly in the past 10 years, there's been a tendency of people to gather in churches that express their partisan preferences," he says. "Traditional conservatives and traditional liberals could live with each other, but now there's a particular kind of conservative who only wants to be in churches of his own views."

But there are signs of hope, he says: "I think it's getting better."

AS THEY MOVED toward retirement, the Stuarts were looking forward to a much different life in Sausalito, with time to catch up on reading—and sailing, even if it's on Lake Michigan, not San Francisco Bay. "I learned as a kid in Iowa, and both Gini and I love to sail," Stuart says.

"It will be fun to be in a small town," Stuart was saying before his retirement was postponed. "We have very good friends close by, and Chicago is just a two-hour drive away."

But retirement heaven can wait. Beginning on March 1, Stuart will assume his new responsibilities as head of the Presbyterian ministry in San Anselmo. For this year, at least, the Stuarts will divide their time between San Anselmo and Sausalito.