

# *A Life, A Church, and a City Transformed*

**P**astor Bill Thompkins was feeling the effects of 23 straight years of pastoring—with its ups and its downs. And he was looking for a way to continue his leadership with the fresh fire and passion he'd always known.

Thinking back to 2003, Bill readily admits that both he and his church—the Fellowship of Christian Believers in Racine, Wisc.—were fraught. The members of the diverse congregation loved each other but were lacking avenues to demonstrate Christ's love in the community, which had become increasingly troubled over the years.

Then everything—everything—began to change in the spring of 2003 when Bill first visited Cedarly, Pastors Retreat Network's center in Delafield, Wisc.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Bill expected the gracious reception by his Cedarly hosts Andy and Nancy Hagen and the new lasting friendships with pastor peers. But what he didn't expect was the deepening of his appreciation for God's creation. After living in the city for so long, Bill realized that he had literally forgotten how nature can calm, soothe and bring peace.

When one young pastor discussed his personal commitment to setting aside one day a week just to be with God, Bill laughingly dismissed the idea—his busy schedule just wouldn't allow such a luxury, he thought. By the end of that

week, however, Bill felt God saying, "You can't take one day off a week for me?" The answer was clear. Yes, he could—and yes, he must.

## A NEW WIND BLOWING

Bill's Cedarly experiences became a call to action—a springboard for dramatic and powerful changes in his life and ministry back home.

Those changes started on the inside with setting aside one day a week just for God. In his backyard, he built a personal prayer house, like Cedarly's prayer chapel. He also planted shrubs and flowers to promote the environment of prayer—so pervasive at Cedarly.

Bill's time with God highlighted things that needed to change in his church and community. And he felt both the desire and the power to be an instrument of those changes.

## THE NEHEMIAH PROJECT

The Bible (in Nehemiah 1) says that when Nehemiah realized the sad condition of his beloved Jerusalem, he began to weep and pray. And then he offered himself to God, as an instrument for transforming and saving the city.

With his newfound appreciation for beauty and improved spiritual eyesight, Bill finally saw the true condition of his own city—and he, too, began to weep,



Bill Thompkins prepares for the Nehemiah project

pray and ask God how he might be a blessing to Racine.

Urban Racine had lost the colors and sounds of nature. The contrast with the beauty he had seen at Cedarly couldn't have been more dramatic. In short—Urban Racine needed a makeover.

As Bill and his congregation sought God in prayer, they realized that improving the city's physical environment could be a first step toward renewing the residents' sense of pride and possibility. From that thought grew the "Nehemiah Project"—an effort to beautify Racine, improve the community and build new relationships far beyond the walls of the church.

Today, through this unique public-private partnership, more than 250 families see their yards come alive with green and blooming plants. The city purchases the materials and the members of the Fellowship of Christian Believers and the neighborhood do the planting and maintenance.

Best of all, the participating families—most of whom are not church members—are also becoming givers. Each family signs an agreement that after four years, they will share their botanical bounty with other homes in the community. The environmental and spiritual multiplication is enormous. More homes and yards are beautified each year. And more hearts come alive as people see, perhaps for the first time, the goodness of nature.

Thanks to the Nehemiah Project, Racine has never looked more beautiful. And the church has exciting new opportunities to serve and minister to its neighbors.

### THE UNITY OF THE BODY

At his Cedarly retreats, Bill saw unity among the body of Christ. He longed for churches in Racine to unite just as pastors from different denominations



Heading home to the beauty of Racine

come together at retreats. Psalm 133 inspires his congregation: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.” They act on those words, seeking creative ways to be a blessing to other congregations—with no hidden agenda.

From the congregation’s efforts in unity, came “The Gathering”—a movement by which local churches come together once each quarter for 24 hours of prayer, praise and worship. Participants agree all Christ-followers are one in Jesus, despite

denominational or stylistic differences.

Also in the spirit of unity, Bill mentors several younger Racine pastors weekly, posing some thought-provoking questions: *Are you taking time to guard your heart? Is your schedule out of control? What are your struggles?*

Bill encourages his fellow pastors to journal consistently and to participate in retreats

at Cedarly as part of a pattern of healthy spiritual life. The result has been a tremendous strengthening of each pastor’s walk with the Lord.

Bill has enjoyed every visit he’s made to Cedarly. But, more than that, he has been challenged to change his heart, his church, his community and the greater body of Christ in Racine.

Today, the results are there for all to see.

And that’s what Pastors Retreat Network is really all about. 🌿

➤ Positive effects of the Nehemiah Project helped the church gain the respect of Racine’s city government. So much so, the city has given the Fellowship of Christian Believers control of a formerly dilapidated local park, which the church is positioning as the center of a new 10-block gardening district. And they’re actively praying for the chance to use the soon-to-be-refurbished facilities for new youth programs, job training and other community-focused activities.



Customers of the Nehemiah Project

Recently, the church also has launched a mentoring program in the local school system. There, participants work with students to improve both kids’ academic performance and their life skills.