



Sidewalk Sanctuary: 'The Pastor Is In' on West 96th Street

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Rev. Lindsay Borden in front of Second Presbyterian Church.

By Susanne Beck

Like most sanctuaries in New York, the Second Presbyterian Church on West 96th Street, just off Central Park West, was forced to take its programming online when COVID-19 shut down the city last March.

But virtual ministering wasn't cutting it for the church's interim pastor, Lindsay Borden — or more importantly, she felt, for her parish. When the weather turned warm last summer, she began to offer social gatherings for parishioners in the park on random Saturdays as a way to

reconnect in a safe, socially distant way. Still, in keeping with a church community pledge to reach out to unaffiliated neighbors, she felt called to do more.

“I was like, no one knows we are here,” she explains. “The church isn’t really closed. The building is closed. The church is still here. I wanted to let the neighborhood know that. And I also wanted to let the neighborhood know that we were thinking of them, you know, that we cared about them.”

So Reverend Borden, in her 60’s, turned to her early creative training – in the theater (actor and director) and the high-end culinary arts – and improvised.

She is still not sure where she got the idea, but within weeks, “The Pastor is ‘In’” booth – the spiritual equivalent of Lucy Van Pelt’s own creation – was born. By early August, Reverend Borden had stationed herself once a week, in a chair by a small table, on the sidewalk, just to the side the church’s bright red door. The sign on the flip chart said it all: the pastor was in and prayers were available for “\$0”.

Reverend Borden carefully positioned her station to be as visible as possible which was hard given the seemingly permanent scaffolding that has lined part of the block since she started her job in 2018. “It’s horrible,” she says about the unwanted shroud. “I think we now have the record for the longest scaffolding in New York City. Unless someone is sitting at a table out front saying the pastor is in, you can’t tell!”

Many of those who stopped and took a seat next to the flipboard sign in the following weeks were not part of the church’s 60-member congregation. They simply wanted to pray for friends or family or just in general – not surprising given the stress that COVID had brought into almost everyone’s lives. “Sometimes I would sit there for an hour and no one would stop,” Reverend Borden says. “I felt it didn’t matter. I was there. They would ask for pictures. They would say thank you as they moved on. One woman waved and said, ‘I’m Jewish!’ And I said, ‘that’s okay. I’m still praying for you!’”

The booth stayed open, once a week, through Election Day. “I made a point of being there the week before the presidential election,” Reverend Borden explains. “People were very tense, and I felt that it was important to be there.”

During that time, most people asked for prayers “for a good outcome.” “I did not ask them what they meant by that,” the minister says. “But I think I knew. And those prayers worked apparently!” Reverend Borden recalls with satisfaction.

The booth was closed during the winter months – but only temporarily. With the thermometer heading northward, Reverend Borden has returned to her sidewalk perch most Wednesday

afternoons between 3 and 5 p.m. She is excited to be back, and to reconnect with the West Side community that passes by.

“It’s been crazy,” she says now of the last 18 months. But along with her proverbial flock, she remains committed to reaching out to neighbors, to understanding their needs, and buoying their emotional lives at this challenging time. A chair and an unexpected invitation to stop and talk on West 96th may be just the way to start.