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Having covered religion for the Carolinas' largest newspaper for 14 years, I thought I had a handle on life at a church like Myers Park United Methodist.

From the outside looking in, I figured people were content to worship for an hour on Sunday, serve a little during the week and go home satisfied that they'd done enough.

Then I walked through the doors as a church worker for the first time and discovered a heartbeat I had not heard before. The faithful come not just to find God, but to find themselves and their place in the world. It's this restless spirit that makes a church of any size hum. We claim 4,500 members now, having welcomed 300 new members in 2006. They come for the hymns and sermons, of course. But deeper than that, they come because they believe this is where they can begin to change a great, big, troubled world.

It's easy in life to feel as if you're going through the motions, that you will never be able to leave your footprints on this earth. Then you come to a house of worship filled with energy and programs. You open your Bible and bring its words to life at the homeless shelter. You understand, perhaps for the first time, that you do truly matter.

More than ever in faith life, I believe this to be true: Churches don't prosper just because they have a gifted pastor, a good location, or a lot of money. They prosper, they have a reason to exist, because they meet the most fundamental need of people today. They give us a purpose.

After 31 years in secular newspapers, I left the grind of a declining industry to become director of communications at one of the Carolinas' largest United Methodist churches. I had been hearing the whispers of a call for several years, a tug to use what gifts I possess to help a charity or congregation tell its story. When Dr. James C. Howell, the senior pastor and a friend for years, asked me to come and tell this story, I figured I'd put out a newsletter, update the Web site and call it a day.

Then I started getting to know church members and welcoming their calls, e-mails, and visits about mission trips, mentoring projects, DISCIPLE Bible study, and all the other ways they find to grow and serve. I wrote a story for our new church magazine, *Intersection*, about a day in the life of this place. I got here at 6 a.m. one typical weekday—I brought sausage biscuits for the maintenance crew—and didn't leave until they locked the doors at 10 p.m. In between, I came across men's Bible study, senior citizens' exercise, the homeless spending the night, the praise band rehearsing for Sunday, inner-city youth working on job-interview skills, children preparing for their Christmas musical, and more.

People loved the story because they love what it says about their church: We are at a magnificent intersection. As Dr. Howell wrote in the magazine: "We work to draw people toward that intersection between their lives and God, to connect our direction with people who do not know God or are suffering, to dare to discover the crossings between what God did a few thousand years ago and this very minute."

People, today more than ever, yearn for a 24-hour church, one that can lead them to the corner where God and the world meet. They want that intersection to be busy and even a little risky, because it's good if they are called to show some courage. Caring for AIDS patients shouldn't be easy.

Neither should our churches.

Life is too hard for our faith homes to take it easy on us.