



It's Messy, Right?
A Conversation with Shawna Bowman
September 12, 2024



Transcript

Sara Hayden: Shawna Bowman, thank you so much for being here today.

Shawna Bowman: Yeah.

Sara: Uh, would love to have you talk just a little bit about Friendship Presbyterian Church, which is a community that you have served for a number of years now. Not only pretty long term, but also in various iterations and locations, which I think is fairly unique-

Shawna: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... for faith communities these days.

Shawna: Yeah, so I've been at Friendship for 13 years-

Sara: Wow.

Shawna: ... and I just say that really humbly, 'cause I, very naively, when I first started, thought people shouldn't stay this long in one place, and sometimes that might be true. I think context really matters. But I also am aware that I don't think we would be able to do some of the work that we're doing currently without having built those relationships and that longevity, and so I feel like that's a gift at this season in our ministry. But we're currently located at 5150 Northwest highway, but we're in the center of a neighborhood in Chicago called Jefferson Park, which is on the northwest side. Our space is a commercial space. It's 4000 square feet. We're the anchor tenant of an affordable housing building that was built and is operated by, uh, not for profit, affordable housing developer called Full Circle Communities, and we've been there just over two years.

Sara: Amazing. For those who aren't familiar with the term anchor tenant. What does that mean?

Shawna: So it's a building that's 75 units of housing. It's technically mixed income. The majority of units are affordable housing, which means they're income based, and they range from apartments that are studio to three bedroom. And then on the ground floor there is a lobby, and adjacent to that there's a commercial space, and Full Circle, could've rented it to anybody, and Friendship is the commercial tenant. So, anchor tenant just means we're the ground floor, sort of, main face on the street level of the building.

Sara: Yeah, amazing. So, um, this is kind of getting fairly technical, but I think as folks might imagine, various ways in which we make a home for people and we make space in communities and neighborhoods. I think it's interesting to think about commercial tenant, I admit my blind spot, where I would assume that nonprofits and churches are not commercial tenants. But obviously, you have fallen into that category. Not only found your place in there, but as the anchor tenant in that situation.

Shawna: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and we've chosen to be a tenant that we do contribute to the taxes. So part of what our learning has been as we've engaged in, what does it mean to become an integral part of the life of a community and to center the relationships that we make with local partners, whether it's other organizations or businesses or our neighbors, that the church's relationship to the economy of a neighborhood really is important. And so as the commercial tenant, we contribute to property taxes, even though we could use our not-for-profit status to not do so.

Sara: Wow.

Shawna: We found that it's been important to make that contribution. We negotiated that as part of our rent.

Sara: You intentionally determined that you wished to contribute more finances to the neighborhood rather than exempt yourself from that need?

Shawna: Yeah, and part of that is Friendship. Presbyterian Church launched a not-for-profit called Friendship Community Place, and that is the actual tenant of the space, and part of what we negotiated was sharing that cost, because the owner operators also have to contribute to the property taxes. It's how, part of how that space got negotiated.

Sara: You mentioned, just a few minutes ago, that part of your own discernment has been coming to terms with maybe a philosophy you brought into leadership, which was knowing when it was time to move or not stay too long in one place, to avoid wearing out your welcome leadership in the church. (laughs)

Shawna: (laughs)

Sara: But you have seen the benefits of longevity. I'll say, I assume that longevity, in and of itself, is not of benefit. What does it look like to, in terms of your own practice and the ways in which you, you as pastor, a Friendship Presbyterian Church lead, that allow you to contribute over the long haul? And has that changed over time?

Shawna: Yeah, I do think it's changed over time. I mean, I think those of us in congregational ministry right now are experiencing a really crucial season in the life of the church. For those of us who are in congregations, who are choosing to experiment, to take risks, to wander and to wander a bit in the wilderness that we're currently finding ourselves in. What I think we've

learned together at Friendship is that to reorientate the church's relationship to the community, to build trustworthy relationships with community members and community partners, takes time.

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: And particularly when people have had experiences of the church that are unhelpful or harmful or just disconnected, there is the work of not just reconnecting, but of trust building, of writing new kinds of relationships. In the building where we are, we have made it a priority to center and follow the lead of our neighbors in the building and the people who live in our building, many of them have experienced homelessness, and many of them have experienced the impact of inequity in our systems. And many of them are veterans, people with disabilities, and in many spaces that they have been forced to navigate, those spaces have not been hospitable, have not been spaces grounded in a sense of dignity, and a lot of times where they've encountered faith based programs or services, they've been expected to participate in exchange for services.

Right? That there's this transactional history the church has in offering resources to communities, and so it's taken us two years to build relationships of trust where we're clear that we see our neighbors as full collaborators and that we want to be in relationship with them. We aren't creating a bait and switch experience. We aren't evangelizing that we are compelled by our faith to be the church in the way that Friendship is currently living into our identity and that doesn't require people for whom we collaborate with to join us on our spiritual journey. And so all of those relationships take time to build, and the trust that we're trying to create between ourselves and other partners in the community that might be service providers or might be local businesses or what have you, each of those relationships takes time to foster, and I think for better or worse, the church has put ourselves in a position over the course of history where we do need to prove ourselves as trustworthy in our communities, and so that takes time.

Sara: Yeah. You have a kind of clarity that this is the right thing to do because of who you are, and to not offer a bait and switch kind of experience, but lean into the kind of mutuality that is, I think, very much a part of huge aspects of our faith and theology. Incarnation comes to mind for me, Christ, becoming human, God, dwelling in the neighborhood with people. And there's a part of my brain that wonders, like, and acknowledges, as you said, that things are going to take longer because of this approach. But having it become the right approach, I wonder if, does it lessen certain burdens, knowing that this path was so intentionally chosen and followed and adhered to.

Shawna: Friendship has shifted, certainly over the last decade, as we've said goodbye to some people and welcomed other people, as we've loved and cherished and buried people and welcomed new humans into our community. Friendship is, in some ways, somewhat typical in that white, progressive Midwest space. We were never going to be a force of evangelism on the northwest side of the city of Chicago, right? So that's not a huge shift. I think, for me, where I have seen in my own self and in the work of being the church in this particular place in space, is

that not having a sense of, "I've got to save souls for Jesus." But what does it mean to come to, as you say, a clarity of my own faith and belief in a way that I am compelled to be and do in a certain way, that I'm compelled to build the kinds of relationships that we've been working to build? And I think that has been a process of deepening our own sense of identity, our own sense of vocation in terms of who we're called to be for this particular time and place. And to build confidence, to be able to claim that and move with confidence, with that sense of purpose.

I wonder sometimes that if in the corner of the church where I spend most of the time, which is a progressive space, that we haven't exercised that muscle as much as we need to of clarity and of purpose and of being able to claim our work and our worth. And one of the things that I've learned as friendship has been developing the relationships that we have to be able to be where we are now, is that there's a difference between trying to convince somebody that they should be what you are (laughs) and having clarity of who I am and what I bring to the table. And I think that we have sometimes developed a real apologetic approach to being the church. And there's certainly a place for confession in the church, of where we fall terribly short, and of our complicitness. And also, I think, as friendship, what we've learned is to be real clear on and we borrow from the organizing community and organizing work. What is it that we're getting up to? What value did we bring? Why are we worthwhile as a partner or even as an anchor tenant?

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: And so I think that's been a work in progress for us, but certainly as clarity, that I would say that I have now that I might not have been able to name 13 years ago.

Sara: That feels like freedom to me too. It can really take our whole lives to lean into the focus of who we are compelled to be in our being, in our life, in our breath, in our word, in our work as disciples of Jesus Christ. Yeah, me focusing on myself can pretty much take most of my time to let that flow out, not for myself or for the end, but so that I can contribute meaningfully.

Shawna: Yeah, I feel very fortunate too. And part of it is because we are so small. While it's taken time, it's also moved more quickly than some parts of our institution, right? And so this project that we call 5150, this affordable housing building, Friendship first became aware of it as a proposal, and we became early advocates of it, and it came up against a lot of resistance in the neighborhood, and we became part of a coalition of neighbors that advocated for it. We actually sort of creating an organization called Neighbors for Affordable Housing, which continues to do advocacy for affordable housing on the northwest side. But to be able to be present at the moment something is proposed, advocate for it, sort of put our own energy behind it, and it was in that work, that advocacy, that we began to have conversations about, what if we were the anchor tenant with the folks at full circle, the developer, and then to get invited into the design process to see that through? in the middle of a pandemic and get to move in and now be part of like, well the rubber meets the road.

What do these relationships look like in real time. I would say I'm strongest in a creative thinking, visionary space. I mean, I project managed the build out of our space. That is not my specialty.

Sara: Yeah. (laughs)

Shawna: I would never want to do that again.

Sara: Okay.

Shawna: But what a gift to be able to do that. To learn how to navigate everything from zoning, to construction, to what would make our space most accessible and in line with the rest of the building? Like all those kinds of questions, and then to now be on the ground building relationships with our actual neighbors who moved into the building from all parts of the city, each with their own story. I feel like that's such a gift. Oftentimes, I think we come into spaces and we get to hold one piece, and then we pass the baton, and that's beautiful and faithful too. And so for me, I just feel like, to be able to see this through, it really has been many iterations of the church and of my own leadership. It's been such a gift.

Sara: There's a certain honesty to that, knowing that what you're putting into place is something that you inherit the repercussions and blessings of that space. That's very trustworthy in a way.

Shawna: Yeah. Where you're setting somebody up for the future.

Sara: Yeah, here you go. (laughs) And then how often it happens in commercial spaces, or in what we are exposed to so often, handing off one property to another person as quickly as possible and moving away. You mentioned that you are not a big community. How many people are a part of Friendship?

Shawna: Oh, that's a hard question, because then you are asking like, who is Friendship?

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: What's Friendship? So we have a small worshiping community, if that's what we're talking about. On Sunday mornings, we worship hybrid, sort of fully interactive. We have members, elders, leaders, deacons, local and afar. And our worshiping community is 20 to 40 people on any given Sunday. Sometimes half-and-half online, in person.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Shawna: And then there's overlap with our worshiping community and our wider Friendship Community Place, is what we call our not-for-profit, and we draw on a really wide number of community members and our neighbors in the building to help us run our programming through the week. We have a really beautiful kitchen program, and we serve 120, 150 meals a

week out of our kitchen, and share in those stories. We have a dozen kiddos in the building who, we joke, are our youth group-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Shawna: ... that come whenever our door is open. It sort of depends on, as you turn the prism that is Friendship, what side you're looking at, but that's who we are.

Sara: Yeah, when you were doing the build out and designing the space, because I'm assuming Friendship Community Place is where Friendship Presbyterian Church, the in person worshipping community, is located in that same place?

Shawna: Yep.

Sara: How did you forecast what the space would look like? Was it a little bit of a gamble? What did you lean into as major components of square footage?

Shawna: So we had been looking for a new space, prior to advocating for this building, and this becoming our space. And we had developed a vision for a shared space with other organizations, not-for-profits, that had some shared values of ours around equity inclusion, attending to housing inequity and food insecurity. At one point, I feel like I had been in any commercial space on the market on the northwest side of the city of Chicago.

Sara: Right.

Shawna: There was a hot second that I was like, "Maybe I could just sell commercial real estate."

Sara: Yeah. (laughs)

Shawna: I could take you through any building up here. And we were really striking out. We were having a hard time finding partners that would take us seriously. We were having a hard time finding landlords who would rent to a religious community. One of the things we learned in our own experience, because Friendship is the legacy of two historical congregations on the northwest side of the city of Chicago, is that when we create religious spaces that are set apart from the community and not integrated, it's really hard to make those inroads. And so when we began looking for space, we very specifically said we want to be stewards of our space in a way that it is utilized by the community, that there is daily access, that we are one of many users, and that to sort of right size what a worshipping community needs in a space, especially our size. And so we had a vision for a multi-purpose space, and then when we were advocating for this space, we actually had become sort of a pain in the ass to the local alderman, who has since become a good friend of mine.

But we kept bugging him about all of these commercial spaces. And he was like not really into having a church in any of them, because of all the assumptions we make about Church. In

Chicago, there's a rule that a bar or restaurant can't serve alcohol within like a 100 feet of a church, library or school, right?

Sara: Wow.

Shawna: So, it's Chicago. So there's also, of course, like, ways to get around that.

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: And we were like, "We would actually love it if a bar was within a 100 feet." (laughs) Like, that is not a prohibition for us, but it's extra work, right? And so, when this affordable housing building was proposed, it was also not something that the whole community was a fan of. And so the alder person was like, "You two should talk to each other." And I feel like he was like, "Let me kill two birds with one stone here." (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Shawna: It turned out we were so in alignment around our values and what we were hoping to accomplish in the neighborhood. And the Full Circle communities, the developer, was so encouraging of our vision for the space, and felt like, "Yeah, we could rent to a Walgreens. Or we could rent to Friendship and have them be part of the ecosystem of community and care in our building." And so we created the space with that in mind. We were also able to build a space with global pandemics in mind because-

Sara: Wow.

Shawna: ... we know about it at this point. Our 4000 square feet is divided into three spaces. They're all multi-purpose. They're all meant to be shared. They're designed to be resources to the community, and they are a place where Friendship Presbyterian Church also happens to worship on Sunday.

Sara: How do you communicate? What do you choose to communicate about the intersectionality of that space for anyone who might come into the building?

Shawna: Yeah, it's a great question that you ask. I'm so close to it.

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: There's my answer, that I think I'm communicating all the time.

Sara: Right.

Shawna: And then there's, we're doing a strategic planning process right now, so we just did a community partners and vision conversation where we invited everybody we've partnered with

for the last two years to come be brainstormers with us. And one of the pieces of the community feedback was like, "There's so much beautiful stuff happening inside here, and if you walk by from the outside, you would have no idea." And I was like, "What?"

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: "What do you mean?" Because I'm inside all the time, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: And we actually do have these beautiful murals, but they're in the back, so if you don't go back there, you don't see them. And the front of the building, while I think it's quite attractive, is kind of boring. And so is this really great feedback. And so the answer to your question is, we're still a work in progress around communicating and visibility. I will say the thing that we're very clear on is that Friendship Community Place, is the primary manifestation of mission of our work in the world as Friendship Presbyterian Church. So the two organizations are deeply entwined, which is by intention, and that comes through in the way that we're organized. It drives our accountant crazy. But if you're on the session of Friendship Presbyterian Church, you're automatically on the board of Friendship Community Place.

Sara: Okay.

Shawna: And then there's more space for our large representation. So we have representation from people who live in the building. We hope to grow representation from our partner organizations. And so we try to communicate that Friendship Community Place is both open and available and accessible to all people. The programming we provide through that is usually resource, education or advocacy work.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Shawna: We never do religious programming as Friendship Community Place. We try to be very clear that when we're doing faith based or spiritual programming, it's the church and it's not ever a requirement, but it's messy, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: Like it's messy, and we are still working out, "How do we communicate this, so that we're never hiding that we're a church?"

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: We don't want to do that and we wanna be authentic and present. What I'm finding is there's just so much education work to do around what we can do and be as a community of faith and relationship and in collaboration with our neighbors that isn't about evangelism, but

that is about community building. We're very engaged in mutual aid efforts in our neighborhood. We've been part of receiving new arrivals, asylum seekers and migrants, and connecting them to resources as they've come to Chicago. And so I think I'm being redundant, and it's not enough. (laughs)

Sara: Yeah.

Shawna: I feel like there's always more communication to do and more ways to tell our story. I think it's the hardest thing. I think this question might be the hardest thing, one of the biggest challenges for us in the coming season.

Sara: Yeah.