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Two historic downtown Richmond churches.

Two disparate paths distinct from one another because of race and heritage.

Two congregations in downtown Richmond seeking a better and brighter future that moves from parallel existence in faith and ministry to points of connection and a partnership. This new partnership promises to bring healing and hope to individual lives, congregational life — and even city life.

Ebenezer Baptist Church, on Leigh Street in Jackson Ward, and Second Presbyterian Church, on the corner of Fifth and Main streets, continue to work together to know one another better, to overcome their segregated histories and to form a partnership that creates new possibilities for each congregation and for their important work in ministry in downtown Richmond.

This sense of connection started when we — the congregation's pastors — first met each other at a meeting of downtown churches. We each recognized the similar histories of their congregations in faith and service in the city of Richmond.

Second Presbyterian was formed in 1845. Ebenezer was organized in 1858. Both churches have remained on the same spot since their founding, with only some modifications to their current buildings.

Both churches have their identities and ministries tied directly to their downtown locations — with both seeking to bear Christ's light and hope in the city.

Both congregations have a rich history of worship and music in their present sanctuaries. Both were led or founded by distinguished and long-serving pastors. As the current pastors, Alex Evans is only the 12th in the history of Second Presbyterian, and Levy Armwood is the ninth at Ebenezer.

Both congregations have maintained long and faithful ministries of feeding the hungry, helping the hurting, serving and educating children and caring for God's people in the city.

As pastors, we also shared a vision: After operating and serving along disparate paths segregated by race and heritage — with the faith and ministry of the other congregation almost unknown to the other — a better and more faithful journey of life and service in the city might include a caring partnership of connection and commitment.

Armwood invited Evans to preach at Ebenezer in January 2011. Evans invited Armwood to preach at Second in February 2011.

Each congregation received the visiting pastor as more than an emissary from a downtown neighboring church. These moments were a harbinger of future life and ministry together.

Since that pulpit exchange, members of each congregation have been meeting to know one another better, to share ideas about various ministry endeavors and new possibilities together, to listen and learn from one another.

The Men's Ministry of Ebenezer hosted the Men's Ministry of Second Presbyterian, which will be reciprocated in the coming months.

John Moeser, an expert on urban affairs in Richmond and a member at Second Presbyterian, led a forum at Ebenezer with the theme "Race, Poverty and Locality in Metro Richmond," based on the recent U.S. census data.

Long separated by a segregated society across too many years, these two congregations feel called by God to overcome and move beyond their segregated pasts toward a more faithful, unified future. These two congregations sense God's Spirit and energy igniting them to embody reconciliation and hope for the city and for the future.

While each congregation values its history and traditions in worship and life, the two congregations know that a better way forward remains through a caring partnership. This will include increasing conversations and joint ministry ventures that will include both mercy and justice.

Each congregation will continue with its own important tutoring and feeding ministries. Each will carry on the worship and music ministries that emerge from their respective traditions.

But there will be combined energy to address looming opportunities and new ministries. Both congregations find themselves called to new ministry ventures with the expansion of VCU, whose campus approaches both churches.

These two churches know that joint efforts will bring greater possibilities. Both congregations see continuing needs from those on the streets for food and shelter, by the ever-changing nature of neighborhoods around the church and by the cultural shifts that are challenging all churches. These churches want to stand together and serve together, reconciling past distinctions and pointing the way toward a more wholesome and hopeful future.

Other discussions in this partnership involve new ways to speak truth to power in the city and state, to advocate for more justice and hope for those who are struggling the most — and for an openness to how God might use the two congregations, born out of those disparate paths, for a more unified and effective partnership. Moreover, for a city with such a divided past, these two churches seek to model reconciliation and unity for a brighter future.

Levy Armwood is pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Jackson Ward. Alex Evans is pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in downtown Richmond.