

Note: The Vision Statement should be read as a description of Pullen’s past and a projection of what we want to be true of Pullen by 2028.

Defying Gravity: One Church’s Story in America Vision Statement

Pullen’s Past

Pullen Memorial Baptist Church is unlike a typical Baptist congregation. Pullen has been on the prophetic edge of the Christian tradition since its founding in 1884. The church was founded on the social gospel, which understands Jesus’ teaching as a call to live out of radical love and to seek justice for the marginalized. This “prophetic edge” defined Pullen’s preaching and public witness throughout the twentieth century, from critiques of capitalism during the Great Depression to ongoing protests for racial justice starting in the 1950s, to its open embrace of the LGBTQIA+ community in the 1990s. Well into the twenty-first century, sermons from Pullen ministers addressed the most pressing moral issues of the day, from racial and reproductive justice to the environmental crisis. Pullen’s particular way of following Jesus in love and justice began to be described as “justice-love” and increasingly defined the center of Pullen’s message and ministry.

In pursuit of justice-love, Pullen was already on its way to redefining itself when COVID-19 changed the social and religious landscape in America. The pandemic forced a reckoning – what had been a slow but steady evolution toward inclusive worship and community reached a peak after the pandemic and led to a dramatic rebirth.

Vision of Pullen’s Next Five Years as Might be Described Retrospectively in 2028

Following the COVID pandemic, Pullen challenged its assumptions and its limits, redefining itself not as a gated community of like-minded “believers,” but as a living body grounded in the exchange of love, of resources, of ideas, of care, and of glimpses of the divine. As other churches struggled to get members to come back into their buildings, Pullen just ignored the walls, calling the community in just as she compelled her members out into the world. A new vision of church took hold, and the congregation stopped worrying about “surviving” and “protecting its legacy” and rather stepped boldly into the free flying spirit of God. Pullen stopped asking what the church needed to survive and began to ask what people needed to live kin-dom lives.

The church had already decided that baptism, long a defining Baptist ordinance, was a personal choice, not a threshold for belonging. Belonging to Pullen is now based on a commitment to justice-love and a promise to care for each other within the context of a Christian congregation. Having fought for racial justice throughout its history, the congregation now prioritizes its commitment to intersectional justice, focusing on antiracism.

No longer just the home of its founding Christian congregation, Pullen now hosts and incorporates the multiple faith traditions that commit to walking together in the pursuit of justice-love. A progressive Muslim congregation; a Zen Buddhist sangha; and practitioners of Ifa, a traditional

African faith, gather for worship here throughout the week. Pullen does not bend to the gravity of belief statements but welcomes all who seek justice-love without insisting that there is only one path to God or a meaningful existence. Worship is central to the heart of this community, and while it honors the spine of the Christian liturgical calendar, the embodiment of worship is creative, responsive, and ever-becoming by including the sacred writings and voices of other justice-love faith traditions. Pullen uses the traditions of other faiths as an opportunity to affirm the sacredness of other religious practices and glean from their wisdom. In a world where narrow political interests use faith to divide us, Pullen embraces religious differences as a rich resource for defining and pursuing our purpose.

Reclaiming Jesus's example of justice-love - to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner - nearly every member of the congregation who is able is connected to an outreach or community engagement initiative. Pullen members move outside the walls of their church to serve their community. In 2024, Pullen identified a few non-profits working on social justice issues in the larger Raleigh community to partner with for five years. Now, many of Pullen's congregants are volunteers in those partner organizations. As a result, many non-profits now use the church building as a place where they can meet and equip themselves to serve the larger world. These partnerships are mutually beneficial, as partners also contribute to the operating budget, building upkeep, and operational expenses related to the building. This collaborative approach with partner organizations has so inspired the congregation's support of its ministries that giving to the annual budget has increased significantly.

Pullen's partnership with other religious and civic institutions in the city has opened the door for other faith and community leaders to teach and facilitate opportunities for learning. Sunday groups are taught by lawyers, rabbis, divinity school professors, imams, writers, poets, artists, and social justice activists. On any given day, there are 6-8 people sitting in a circle in the chapel practicing various forms of meditation. And on the weekends you will find Pullen children and youth attending programs on human sexuality, social justice, and lock-ins that provide social interaction with their peers.

Resisting hyper-individualism and combating the loneliness epidemic, Pullen has groups for men, women, youth, young adults, and singles where individuals can foster relationships with others in a similar stage in life. There are support groups for people who are LGBTQIA, neurodivergent, and even non-religious; for caregivers and elders; and those living with chronic illness and mental health challenges. Pullen strives to be a place where there is room for everyone at the table.

Pullen holds the history and legacy of a social justice Christian congregation that stands on the shoulders of past Pullenites, while simultaneously daring to be born into each moment, expansive and new. Here, in this safe place, a seeker finds that they can be their most authentic self as they question and discover what holds meaning in their life. Pullen is a church defying gravity in a culture of religion-driven divisiveness that holds people down in an oppressive and abusive faith. Instead of living in that culture, Pullen has chosen to be a place that brings people together in their differences as well as their commonalities while offering a faith of love and justice. Just as Jesus ate at the table with those that society deemed unworthy, so Pullen invites all to the table of love, especially those who have lost faith in religion and religious institutions. Pullen is defying gravity in America's religious landscape.