

SHORT TAKES

Congregations Are Rethinking Church and Changing their World



Chicago Pastors Take Church to the People

There is a familiar saying: “If you build it, they will come.” Though the adage refers to a ball field in the movie *Field of Dreams*, one could argue the same words apply when it comes to building churches. Put up the walls, install the stained glass, open the doors . . . and they will come. However, United Methodist elders Trey Hall and Christian Coon are taking a different approach to starting a new congregation. Instead of beginning with bricks and mortar, they are starting with hearts and souls, building relationships that will be the foundation of the Urban Village Church.

“We’re committed to creating a diverse Christian community in the heart of the city of Chicago,” said Hall. “An ‘urban village’ where in the midst of mass movements of people and the rapid exchange of ideas, we build relationships with God—relationships that change our lives and somehow often change the world.”

Rooted in the South Loop and West

Loop neighborhoods, but reaching out to the entire Chicagoland region, Urban Village Church officially started in 2009, and launched weekly services last spring.

Over the past year, they have used Facebook and other social media to convene an eclectic mix of city dwellers for relational meetings in coffee shops, bakeries, and bistros. Several times a week, they sit with friends and friends of friends, as well as perfect strangers, to ask questions. “It’s been so fascinating to meet people where they are in their faith journey and to hear their stories,” Coon said. “After this experience, I will never be the same kind of pastor. It’s tempting to stay in your building and minister to the people who come there, but rather than waiting for people to come to us, we’re trying to go to them and meet them in their own context.”

Sunday worship will not be the only time these groups of seekers and believers gather. During the week, there may be a book discussion at a coffee shop in Andersonville, a parenting class in the South Loop, a “theology on tap” conversation at a West Loop pub, a group of friends sharing a picnic at a concert in Millennium Park, or a team of colleagues serving a meal to poor sisters and brothers downtown.

“We are trying to find where people are living their lives,” noted Hall. “Are they with the sports team at a Saturday beach game, or at the park playing with their kids, or on their lunch hour in the middle of the workweek, or in a bar after work? We’re not trying to build a church where they will come, but instead a church that will go to them.”

— Susan Passi-Klaus (UMNS)

First UMC Beaumont Says “Don’t Go to Church”

When Brett Smith first heard that First UMC Beaumont, Texas, was considering shutting down the church on a Sunday morning to do service projects, he thought it was “a fairly radical concept.”

“Don’t Go To Church. Be the Church.” was the motto for the congregation’s Faith In Action Sunday last fall. Two hundred and one members volunteered in sixteen different locations. Some projects served individuals, while others benefited nonprofit organizations or the city at-large. Teams fed the homeless; cleaned city streets; painted at the Women and Children’s Shelter and at Some Other Place emergency assistance center; replanted flower beds at the Senior Citizen’s Center; read books and delivered stuffed animals at a children’s hospital; and more.

Although more than 60 percent of the church’s Sunday morning worshippers turned out, evangelism chairperson Cherrie Hefty knew it would take time to get that many people on board. She approached Senior Pastor Frank Alegria with the idea six months in advance. Visiting Sunday school classes and small groups, Hefty began to mobilize the church, which in turn started to submit project ideas.

“There was a cross section of support,” Alegria said. “I think when people finally put hands and hearts to mission, they begin to see God’s kingdom in a new and creative way. We were worshipping God by serving God and serving God’s people.”

— Eleanor L. Colvin,
Texas Annual Conference

Mission without a Mortgage

The first clue that a visitor is not attending a typical Christian church is the indoor climbing wall and batting cage. But that’s just part of Sunday worship with the people of Riverside, a missional community in the small Texas town of Spring Branch.

The Rev. Scott Heare, Riverside’s founding pastor, sometimes makes jokes about the surroundings in his sermons, but Riverside’s leaders are not seeking to move out of this unconventional space as

soon as they have the money to do so. Riverside intentionally does not own any property.

This missional church community was planted by Alamo Heights United Methodist Church, a century-old church in San Antonio, Texas. Alamo Heights has an impressive church building. But for six years, its offshoot's offices, worship spaces, and outreach ministries have been housed in rented buildings spread over several miles in this semirural community.

The reason they rent space instead of owning property is because they have chosen to be, or are led to be, "incarnational, more than attractional," Heare said. "That means we are everywhere, and not just in one place. But we're also willing to move at any time." Riverside rents the center each Sunday for two morning worship services, attended by about 250 people. During the week, the space is filled with an inflatable playground, the Emerald Rainbow Family Fun Center (its website boasts "20,000 ginormous square feet of fun and parties!").

"My prayer is that you will join Riverside in getting back to the basics that church is, to begin again in the heart of Jesus," Heare says, inviting the congregation to commit to Riverside's principles of mission and service. Besides local missions, Riverside supports an orphanage in Uganda and projects on the Texas/Mexico border. The goal is for Riverside to give away 50 percent of its budget to support local and international mission work. Today, Riverside is able to give away 23 percent.

Although Riverside places mission and service over mortgages and building funds, church leaders say that not owning a building has a cost. Financially, Heare said, it might make more sense to own a building. The combined cost of Riverside's many leases easily could equal a mortgage, but the community does not hear a call to plant themselves in one building.

"There are many days when they wish they had a building," says the Rev. David McNitzky, senior pastor at Alamo Heights and Heare's mentor. "But the freedom from having a building enables them to keep their focus on people and on their community."

— Lynn Gosnell
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The Revs. Barry Freese (left) and Eric Huffman visit in the coffee shop home of the newly formed Redemption United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Mo. Freese is senior pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church, which houses the new church start. Huffman is pastor of the new congregation. A UMNS photo by Fred Koenig.

UMCs Partner to Form Coffeehouse Church

Both worship services at Broadway United Methodist Church in Kansas City, Mo., are as traditional as the majestic stone structure and the hundred-year-old sanctuary. When the congregation decided to evangelize people looking for a different spiritual experience, members wanted to do more than just add a contemporary service. They envisioned a new worshipping community with its own pastor and its own identity meeting in Broadway's Keystone Coffee House.

The Rev. Eric Huffman, pastor of five-year-old Revolution UMC in nearby Westport, was looking for a place to start a second congregation. He asked to see the coffee shop and began negotiations with Broadway Church members.

"When a church starts a contemporary worship service, that's usually out of a desire for that type of service from members of the church. Broadway didn't need that," says Huffman. "They were happy with their worship. What they did have was a desire to reach new people for Christ."

The new church, Redemption UMC, started in 2009 with a twelve-member core

group from the Broadway and Revolution churches and receives start-up funds from the Missouri Conference Congregational Development Team. The fall 2009 soft launch had seventy-four people in attendance, most of whom were members of Revolution, but the word has spread.

"Most of the people are now new faces," Huffman says. "The people from Revolution have returned to that church."

Huffman believes this kind of partnership could develop into a model for others who want to revitalize urban churches. "It goes against the nature of most pastors to invite someone else into their playground, to preach and lead new people," he says. "This wouldn't work if we didn't have a selfless person as pastor at Broadway who is willing to put advancing the kingdom first."

— Fred Koenig, *Missouri Annual Conference (UMNS)*

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