

Reaching Out Like a New Church— Whatever Your Age



By Jacob Armstrong

As I made the drive from my house to a local city park on the Saturday before Easter, I noticed church after church hosting their annual Easter egg hunts. The parking lots were packed and children filled church lawns covered in pastel colored eggs. A part of me longed to join them. I had just left a wonderful church where I had served for eight and half years. I remembered the joyous occasion of taking my own children to the church Easter egg hunt. It was a familiar place with familiar friends.

This year, however, I was driving to the city park for

an event hosted by our Community Center called Spring Jam. It was an event for children and families with games, activities, and, of course, an Easter egg hunt. The Spring Jam was sponsored by the city of Mt. Juliet, Tenn., and local businesses. Our new church, which had yet to have its first worship service, was one of the sponsoring entities, and we had a booth with face-painting, balloons, and candy. Over 5,000 people attended the Spring Jam that day. Presumably these were people who did not have a church Easter egg hunt of their own to attend. We shook their hands, painted

their kids' faces, and invited them to Providence Church. We left the Spring Jam that day and headed to a local apartment complex where we hosted, on their grounds, a similar Easter celebration with games and activities for the fifty or so children who lived there.

We didn't go out into the community because there is anything wrong with events on the church grounds. We did it because we had to do it. We had no land or church building to host our own event, and for that matter, not many children of our own. So we joined with our community and went into the community to encounter people for Christ. We pledged that day to be a church that would not be bound by the walls of a building (again, it was easy for us because we had no building!), a church who would be committed to serving the community by going into the community.

There are many things that I have learned as pastor of a new church that have changed the way I look at church. Some of these practices and values have been born out of necessity, but I am committed to hold onto them no matter the size of our congregation or the growth of our assets because I believe they will keep us focused on reaching new people. They will hold us close to Christ's mission to make disciples rather than just caring for our own.

Commit to the Community

Look for ways to engage the community where church members and attendees get the opportunity to live their faith by serving others. There are many ways to leverage the land and building you have to serve the community, but for a couple of events a year, I suggest pretending like you don't have those things. How would you reach out and encounter new people if you did not have a building or land?

Often the only events churches hold for their communities are fundraisers for things such as building a new playground or sending the youth to camp. While these are worthy ventures (and often necessary because building debt has restricted funds to ministry areas), consider what message your fundraisers send to those outside of the church: "Come help us do something for us." Let me recommend doing things for the community that are not fundraisers but instead require your funds, your energy, and your prayers.

On the first day of summer we had a cookout with free food and sno-cones for a local trailer park. On Armed Forces Day our community invited all military families and veterans to an event. We were there with a prayer wall which people could write the names of their loved ones. The next day in worship we carried the prayer wall into our sanctuary (a movie theater at the time) and prayed for those on the wall. We partnered with a public school to build a Math Garden on their campus to assist in teaching children basic math skills. On the Fourth of July we co-sponsored a fireworks display at a local shopping mall.

You may ask, "What do these events have to do with the good news of Jesus Christ?" They are ways that we can go into our

community, walk the streets like Jesus did, and become acquainted with our mission field. We often see needs that we didn't know existed. We are able to invite others to join us in worship. How can we share the gospel if we never encounter those in need of the gospel?

Find out what existing community events you can join in on. You may be surprised how willing community organizers are to work with a church on these events. You will establish relationships that will be of value for years to come. If your community does not offer such events, maybe your church should be the one to plan them. Be creative and have fun doing things that your church can uniquely do and offer to others!

Open the Closed Loop

Another learning point for us at Providence was that many first-time guests to church find it difficult to break through what seems to be a closed loop. At church, guests may see smiling people, but there are many unspoken messages that inadvertently communicate that there is no room in the inn. Take some time to try and see your Sunday morning worship service (which is often the initial entry point for new people) through the eyes of a newcomer. Is the passing of the peace a time when guests stand awkwardly while old friends catch up on last night's ball game? Or is it a time when the members of your church are keeping an intentional eye out for first-time attendees to welcome them to church? Are your announcements and prayer time a time when in-house issues are discussed and lifted up? Or is it a time when all people are invited to connect with God and given opportunity to do so?

A new church has the advantage of not having deeply ingrained traditions and habits that keep the church a closed loop, but early on, even in a new church, there is the temptation to turn inward and close others out. Here are some things we have done to try to open the closed loop. First, we don't assume that everyone knows church lingo and tradition. We include many traditional practices in worship; we

say the Lord's Prayer, affirm our faith with the Apostle's Creed, and celebrate Holy Communion every week. However, when we do these things, we briefly talk about what they mean and why they are important to us. Before saying the Apostle's Creed for the first time at Providence, we spent eight weeks in a sermon series called "Ancient Creed, Living Faith." We talked about the origins of the creed but, more significantly, the reason it is still important today.

We don't assume people will know what to do when an offering plate is passed down their aisle, that they will know how to take Communion, or even that they know how to pray. This may sound silly, but if we are committed to connecting with those who do not go to church, we need to create an environment where they will feel welcome.

I think making a commitment to the community and trying

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to open the closed loop go hand in hand in reaching new people for Christ. No longer can we assume that new people to a community will immediately begin to seek out a church home. The days of providing great programming in a great facility and waiting for the people to come are over. We have to be willing to go where the people are and then provide an environment where they can encounter Jesus with as few obstacles as possible.

Remember the Mission

This brings me to my last point on what the new church can offer to the established church. Most new churches begin with a vision to reach the lost, the un-churched, or whatever term is being used at the time to describe those who do not attend church and who are not connected to Christ. At Providence we use the term “disconnected” to describe those who we are called to reach. The vision of Providence is to “see those that feel disconnected from God and the church find hope, healing, and wholeness in Jesus Christ.” To us this is not a cutting-edge vision statement but instead our way of articulating Jesus’ mission to seek and save the lost. All churches need to reclaim the purpose to make new disciples as the driving force behind the church.

We began our church by meeting in my living room with twenty or so people with Bibles open asking the question “What does it mean to follow Jesus in Mt. Juliet, Tenn. in 2008?” Our conclusion was to seek to be a people committed

to serving our community and offering a worship experience with as few obstacles as possible to those who are disconnected from God and the church. Perhaps the first step for your congregation is to begin meeting with a small group of people who are open to God doing something new in and through them to reach people for Christ.

In Isaiah 43:19 we read that God says, “See I am doing a new thing!” (NIV) We should always be open to the new things that God desires to do. We at Providence certainly do not claim to be experts in being a church. We are only one year old! We know we have much to learn from churches that have been faithful for decades, if not centuries. Yet, even though we are young, we can attest to the power of God that is found when a group of people open themselves up to following Jesus in new ways, in new places, no matter what that may mean. □



Jacob Armstrong is pastor of Providence United Methodist Church, a new church plant in Mt. Juliet, Tennessee.

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