

partners

THE CHURCH PLANTING NEWSLETTER OF THE EC CHURCH

IT'S JUST TOO EASY to lose sight of the really good stuff in life if we're busy watching our feet wade through deep mud. Sometimes, that is what doing church is like – wading through mud. In this issue of *Partners*, we're going to ask you to look up for a few moments as you read story after story of God in action through the people of the church. Come; let's take a journey together . . . (Les Cool, Church Planting Associate, EC Church)

Reach Your Community By ...plugging into existing programs

By Kolleen Long

At Bethesda EC Church, Reedsville, Pa., believers are finding they don't need to reinvent the wheel in order to effectively meet real needs in their community. Pastor Jeff Byerly and Associate Pastor Mark Brooks recently discussed their congregation's involvement in a community backpack program.

The opportunity through the Blue Mountain School District was brought to leaders' attention last fall by a local school teacher. The existing program, connected with the Greater Berks County food pantry, was a good fit for the church.

"Our goal here at the church in community endeavors," explains

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This creative and eye-catching display reminds the congregation of Bethesda EC Church to support their hat drive. Hats purchased by the church will be distributed through a backpack program, which is run in part by the Greater Berks Food Pantry and helps meet the needs of students in the Blue Mountain and Schuylkill Haven school districts.

What Good Does a Backpack Do?

A lot, actually. Backpack programs, a nationwide effort that has grown over the past dozen years, is a great example of effective partnerships between schools, food banks and concerned citizens. It's also a great way for congregations to meet the physical needs – and show God's love in a practical way – to families in their own communities.

According to *feedingamerica.com*, over 21 million children in our nation qualify for free meals at school. In Pennsylvania, the *Pittsburg Post-Gazette* reports, over 40% of students statewide qualify for the program, which is based on family income. Inarguably, many youngsters depend on these meals to fill their bellies, but weekends and school breaks present a challenge for them and their families.

This is where a backpack program steps in: children are sent home with wholesome, easy-to-prepare foods for weekends. Packs also include seasonal or practical items, like the hats recently collected by Bethesda EC Church.

Just as there are certainly economically-stressed families in your church neighborhood, there is likely a back-pack program or similar opportunity in your school district. To find out more, contact your local food bank or school district office. Ask how your church can come alongside this great opportunity to meet the needs of your neighbors.

Brooks, "is to see what's already happening and come alongside."

To start a backpack program, schools must qualify with a certain number or percentage of students who participate in the free lunch program.

It also requires a financial base: it costs approximately five dollars per week, per child to keep the Blue Mountain program running. This totals almost \$10,000 annually, Byerly says, and his congregation committed to \$1,000 of that cost.

This is how it works: Every other month, Bethesda leaders pick an item they will contribute to the backpacks. Past drives have centered on toothbrushes and



toothpaste, suntan lotion and gloves.

"This month," Brooks says, "we decided to provide hats and we decided to order them through a local store."

To generate interest and financial support,

a themed display along with a suggested "per item" donation is set up at the church. Both pastors note that different monthly items draw in different amounts of support. The current hat display, featuring

sample headwear on brightly colored balloons, garnered a lot of interest.

The goal is to collect funds for 120 of the needed item, or one for each backpack-program youngster in the Blue Mountain district. The church purchases and delivers the hats, for example, and students in the local Leo Club take it from there. "They stuff these backpacks, include the hats, and zip-tie them," Brooks explains. The filled packs are taken home by students in three elementary schools, and meet essential needs for the children and their families in the weekend and weeks ahead.

The Bethesda church has since expanded its reach to another backpack program, which started this year in neighboring Schuylkill Haven School District (the congregation has families in both districts). In months where they collect above the 120 items, the pastors explain, they give surplus items to the Schuylkill district for distribution among their 96 current student recipients.

Both pastors agree that their "overflow" of giving is not enough to meet the needs in this district, and have encouraged other congregations to fill the gap. In fact, they note, there is no reason all churches cannot band together to meet the needs of effective programs like this.

"I think they could do it," Brooks confirms, "whether there is a backpack program or not." He encourages churches to call their local food pantries to get started.

“For *I was hungry* and you gave me something to eat, *I was thirsty* and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger* and you invited me in...”

Matthew 25:35

Reach Your Community By ... asking the right questions

By Kolleen Long

A simple children's harvest party at Grace Community Church of Willow Street was a good thing. On Saturday, parents dropped off elementary children, the teaching staff hosted the event, and a good time was had by all.

But "good" wasn't good enough, church leaders decided, when they took a closer look at the event three years ago. Senior Pastor Mike Sigman explains that a change occurred when they asked "not what can we do for children, but what can we do for families? How can we get families to engage with our church?"

This process led the church to move the event to a Friday evening, and to shift toward a festival for the entire family. Also key was getting people from the church to invite friends with no church connections. This was successful because, "frankly, that's part of our DNA at Grace Community, to invite people to all we do," the pastor says.

And church staff supported their efforts. By late summer, a Facebook

page was running to promote the event. They used their email database to send out professionally-designed e-vites, targeting those on the list with families. More traditional, post-card sized invites were also created to hand out.

The original Saturday party drew mostly from the existing Sunday school crowd. By changing the day and focus of the festival Grace saw huge response from their community. The first family event drew 220 people, last year 450 came, and this fall, a crowd of about 600 filled the space to overflowing.

"We bill it as, 'Come from work and school, have supper, have fun, and connect with your neighbor and friends, your church family and your own family,'" Sigman says.

That first year was crucial, he notes, and set the tone for continued growth. Family-friendly remains the focus, with

lots of activities on hand to entertain the anticipated crowd of preschoolers to 5th-graders and their parents.

Children take barrel train rides and jump on large inflatables. Seasonal stations, such as pumpkin bowling and decorating, are set up. A face-painting station is available; one individual walks around the crowd and creates balloon sculptures. Two women from the neighborhood volunteer origami

lessons, bringing a stack of crisp dollar bills and teaching youngsters how to fold them into paper art.

Friendly competition fuels a tug-of-war competition. Another huge attraction for all ages? "A funny, nostalgic cake walk. It's something our people really get into," Sigman

explains. Carnival style food, as well as barbecue from a local business, is also available. There are handouts for children, as well as an invitation for families to come back and try Sunday school at Grace Community.

"It really is simply an event to bring people together in relationship so they get to know each other," Sigman concludes. "Also, it's an event by which we encourage people to invite their unchurched, unsaved friends and family member to come to church and have a nonthreatening introduction to the church."

Replicating this type of successful outreach is possible for all congregations, Sigman notes, if they have the right motivation, ask the right kind of questions and provide the right tools to make inviting others to church events easy to do.

“Come from work and school, have supper, have fun, and connect with your neighbor and friends, your church family and your own family...”

Using Social Media for Good

Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Email. These social media tools, and dozens like them, have become commonplace terms in our lives. Today's churches should employ social media to spread the word about events, especially those that are geared to special interests like the family festival at Grace Community.

Not sure how to plug into the grid? Ask for help. Enlist the help of a techie high-school or college student, perhaps by providing an internship. Find a media enthusiast to post details about events online, and encourage congregants to link to your pages and share them with others. Gather emails at events and create a database, tagging individuals in order to invite them to similar events in the future.

Try sending e-vites for your next outreach event, but don't undervalue the importance of face-to-face invitations. Sometimes, knowing a friendly face will be there is the nudge someone needs to give church a try.

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The Harvest Celebration at Grace Community, Willow Street, Pa., is a great example of effective church outreach. Several years ago, church leaders revisioned the event as a festival for families (not just children) and the result has been positive, with attendance growing each year to maximum capacity in 2014. Church members are encouraged to invite friends and family who do not attend church to this casual, nonthreatening event.



PRAYING FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Day of Prayer for Church Planting, the first Sunday of each month

Please pray for our church planters. Pray for them by name (see the current list of planters).

ASK GOD TO:

- Draw each planter closer to your heart.
- Provide for each planting family.
- Provide ministry contacts in their communities.
- Protect each planter from unnecessary distractions.

Please pray for our church plants. Pray for them by name (see the current list of plants).

ASK GOD TO:

- Provide the necessary leaders and volunteers.
- Protect the heart of the pastor, leaders and volunteers.
- Protect the unity of each fellowship group.
- Provide the financial needs of the ministry.

Currently, we are supporting and/or encouraging . . .

6 Planters and 7 Plants

- Ephrata, PA . . . House of Blessings (Abe Montanez)
- Harrisburg area, PA . . . Restore Community (Brian Parker)
- Lehigh Valley, PA . . . Horizon (Bud Daneker)
- Philadelphia, PA . . . Comunidad Biblica (Rolando Diaz)
- Allentown, PA location
- Pottstown area, PA . . . Journey53 (Rick Christman)
- York, PA . . . Iglesia Cristiana (Carlos Kelly)

2 Restarts / Revitalizations

- Slatington, PA . . . Trinity (Brian Kern)
- Tallmadge, OH . . . New Direction (Tim Ream)

2 Informal Partnerships / 4 Missional Works / 0 Potential Adoptions

- Lancaster, PA . . . Iglesia De Dios Ven A El (Luis Ramirez)
- Millersville, PA . . . The Gathering (Juan Carlos Morales)
- Palmerton, PA . . . Gaming Grotto (Chris Bronico)
- Reedsville, PA . . . LifeTree Café (Jeff Byerly)
- Sinking Spring & Mohn's Hill, PA . . . Two Lifetree Cafés (Jerry Artz, Mohn's Hill & Mike Snedeker, Sinking Spring)
 - "Off the Avenue" and "Canal Street"

