

August 20, 2018

The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2003/spring/2.30.html>

CT Pastors, April 2003

When Your Neighborhood Changes You

How three Twin Cities churches have adjusted to reach their rapidly changing community.

Brett Lawrence | posted April 1, 2003

Since 1990, Minneapolis and St. Paul have seen a massive influx of refugees. The Twin Cities metro area boasts the largest Hmong, Somali, and Oromo (Ethiopian) populations in the United States and the second largest Tibetan and Liberian concentrations.

The University of Minnesota is home to the largest Chinese student population in the country, and the cities were the eighth-fastest growing Hispanic area in the country during the 1990s. All this adds up to nearly half a million internationals, speaking more than 136 different languages.

And the church is responding, with 309 churches planted in the past three years, a pace of one new church every three days. And more churches are taking seriously the need to demonstrate the love of Christ in their communities.

There's "Church at Champps," a ministry of Wooddale Church that meets at a popular sports bar and grill. Its unconventional setting is drawing an unconventional crowd.

In addition, more than a dozen postmodern churches are meeting across the region. Ethnic churches are popping up, and Hispanic, African-American, and Anglo churches are reaching out across ethnic barriers.

With nearly 2,600 churches in the Twin Cities metro area, we can offer just a glimpse of what's happening as congregations are ministering to their changing community.

The urban-suburban link

When Roland J. Wells, Jr., arrived in 1988 as pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, in the shadow of downtown Minneapolis, he found himself in a quandary.

Wells and his wife opted to purchase a home in Roseville, a first-ring suburb adjacent to both Minneapolis and St. Paul, which put him 15 minutes from his church. It also put him at odds with the prevailing urban-ministry philosophy: live in the city, minister in the city, and build a congregation that reflects the culture of the immediate locale.

But Wells's decision was just the beginning of the story.

St. Paul's, a 130-year-old congregation of suburbanites, was committed to making a difference in its urban neighborhood. Members remained at a distinctly inner-city church, Wells says, because they viewed their membership as a matter of mission.

"Our people wanted to do significant things in the city," Wells remembers, "but didn't know how to go about it."

Enter CitySpirit Ministries and the School of Urban Ministry (SUM). St. Paul's launched the two initiatives in 1991. CitySpirit builds what Wells calls bridges to suburban congregations. SUM is a training tool for both church members and suburban partners.

Without Wells's leadership, the move could have been perceived as simply an inner-city church's clever fundraising attempt. But Wells built CitySpirit on three understandings: (1) the congregation's budget, with all its expenses, would remain the congregation's responsibility, (2) outside money could fund only new initiatives, and initiatives were to be discontinued if funding was not available, and (3) any partnerships developed would be mutually beneficial and would require St. Paul's to give back to suburban congregations as much as it received.

The key component of SUM, Wells says, is to equip suburban churches and their members for ministry. That, of course, is easier said than done. Suburban churches undergo changes in leadership regularly—new pastors, new committees, new leaders often mean changes in vision.

"The danger is that some suburban churches have the attention span of a 4-year-old ADHD child," Wells says. "The pastors are under pressure to produce, to show results. They need to be able to say, 'We have a church that relates to the youth of the city. We have a socially conscious church.' But the key to the city isn't splash; it's long-term. It's not 18 months or a couple of trips with junior high kids to serve at a soup kitchen. If a suburban church is going to make a difference in the city, it's with a minimum of a five-year plan."

The foundation of successful urban-suburban church relationships, suggests Wells, is accountability.

"There's lots of time, lots of phone calls, lots of coffee," he says. "And it's hard."

To make his point, Wells tells about the Asian teen who was a part of the church's ministry in the 1990s, an immigrant from Laos with an abusive stepfather. "A brilliant kid," Wells says, "the smartest I've ever worked with, and one of the greatest natural leaders I've ever seen. But he kept one foot in church and one in gangs."

It was the gangs, of course, that spelled trouble. Wells runs through the sad details. A fake pizza delivery. Other gang members with sawed-off shotguns. Someone is killed. Bad public defender. Stillwater Prison. 16 years. "That was our key kid," Wells says.

It's a snapshot of ministry in the city and, Wells believes, one of the reasons suburban church members have a difficult time ministering there.

"There's tons of disappointment, tons of difficult times. You get kicked in the gut over and over again, but that's the calling," Wells says. "People need to understand that city ministries are full of chaos because the city is full of chaos."

Still, there are many victories—small and large.

Some 125 people, most from St. Paul's suburban church partners, have attended SUM, and nearly everyone who has had training is putting it to use. Some work with Metro Hope Ministries, a long-term faith-based treatment program. Others help ethnic churches in the neighborhood. One grad put together a cross-cultural ministry for African-American single mothers in a nearby apartment complex. Other grads have worked with women trying to escape prostitution.

Wells is careful to point out that the goal of SUM is not to generate new members for St. Paul's.

"People get grabbed by the Spirit when they come here," he says. "A tiny handful have plugged into our church, but we encourage them to return to their home congregations and help them develop other people's understanding, to raise their consciousness of what's available here in the city.

"It's a mission field that's 15 minutes from their pillow."

Reach, reconcile, reclaim

Just 15 blocks south of St. Paul's and a short drive down the ethnic corridor that is Lake Street, Pastor Mark Horst and his 1,200-member congregation are operating in what he calls "kingdom-building, Satan-busting territory."

In any of the church's three Sunday services, you'll see a reflection of the neighborhood the church calls home.

"It's a racially diverse church," Horst explains, "with probably 40 percent of our people being people of color." While some of the congregation comes from the suburbs, Horst estimates that at least 50 percent of those who call Park Avenue United Methodist Church home live within one mile of the church.

The commitment to the neighborhood starts with Horst and his staff.

"There's no requirement that our staff live near the church, but we are a church that's anchored in the neighborhood. And a number of our staff members have made choices congruent with that," he says.

"We want to line up our lives—where we live, where our kids go to school—with the ministry of Park Avenue and the people we're serving here."

Park Avenue's ministry is rooted in the three Rs: reaching out, reconciling, and reclaiming. This commitment began in the late 1960s, when white flight began in earnest and city neighborhoods began declining.

This summer, Park is preparing for Soul Lib 30, the thirtieth anniversary of its Soul Liberation Festival. The annual event takes the gospel to the streets and brings summer camp to the heart of the city.

"It's very effective in reaching neighbors with the gospel and communicating the vision of the church as an urban ministry," Horst says. "It's kind of cultural and speaks the language of the neighborhood."

The four-day celebration is part gospel songfest, part kids festival, part evangelistic rally, and all fun.

The church's emphasis on evangelism and reaching out are married to its desire to reclaim people from the snares that keep them from experiencing life in Christ. The church's Cornerstone Ministry provides food and clothing to needy neighborhood residents and provides financial help to those about to be evicted or foreclosed on. For those without medical insurance, there's a once-a-week health clinic staffed by volunteer doctors and nurses who dispense pharmaceuticals that are paid for by the church. There's also a free legal clinic run by attorneys from Park Avenue. The attorneys help with a variety of legal matters, but most of their time these days is spent assisting the neighborhood's Hispanic and Somali populations with immigration issues.

The Park Avenue Foundation, dedicated to eliminating barriers to academic success, plays a prominent role in the church's efforts to help neighborhood children. In addition to after-school educational programs, the church and the foundation work together to minister to children during the summer.

"We had 600 kids in our summer ministry last year," Horst says. "We have camps that allow kids to get on a bus and go away for the week. There are Bible clubs that last all day. On hot days, the kids just go swimming. It's all geared toward the kids' learning. It's about them encountering Christ, about fellowship, and about fun."

As a multi-ethnic congregation, Park also takes seriously its responsibility to address reconciliation issues.

"Reconciliation means, first of all, that we're brought into relationship with God through the blood of Christ," Horst says. "And then we become a community. We say that our church is a sneak preview of heaven. As we worship together, we're a dim reflection of what it will be like when every nation and every tribe and every tongue gathers around the throne of the Lamb and sings hallelujah."

A racially diverse staff is also an important element.

"That's been very intentional," Horst says. "Our staff of 20 or so is about half people of color." Horst says the move toward racial diversity isn't about political correctness but about the power of culture.

"We had a pastor from a church in Bogotá preach at Soul Lib a few summers ago," Horst recalls. "He comes to the altar call, and we've got this diverse crowd of people standing on the blacktop on this muggy July night. Practically every

person who came forward to receive Christ was Latino.

"Culture runs deep with us, and we're not a church that tries to minimize culture to build unity. We're trying to honor the cultures and the differences and be honest about the divisions we experience as people with different backgrounds, different skin colors, and different traditions.

"Then God really gets the glory when we can find unity and reconciliation in that mix."

Global ministry right here

Sierra Leone. Uganda. Haiti. India. Zimbabwe. Panama. Liberia. Mexico. Nigeria. Central African Republic. Rwanda. Guinea. Great Britain. Malaysia. Ghana. Philippines. Vietnam. Laos. Japan. Marshall Islands.

It's an answer that would stump even the best Jeopardy! contestant. The question: What countries are represented in the congregation at St. Paul's Bethel Christian Fellowship?

Yes, that's 20 countries in a congregation with a weekly attendance of 350. And that doesn't include the members of Haitian Christian Fellowship of the Twin Cities, which Bethel helps oversee, or the Spanish-speaking congregation that meets in the church's facility on Sunday afternoons.

For Pastor Jim Olson, who came to Bethel in 1990, it's simply the fulfillment of the church's calling to be a house of prayer for all nations.

Explains Olson: "We've said we will embrace our location in the center of this metropolitan community. It gives us the opportunity to cross ethnic, racial, economic, and ecclesiastical boundaries and to be a mosaic of people who experience unity amid diversity."

Bethel's adoption of a multi-cultural mentality required more than good intentions. It demanded that the congregation be intentional. And that's how MOSAIC, an acronym at the church that means Ministry Outreach Supporting an Inter-Cultural Community in Christ, was born.

"We began to adopt refugee families," recalls associate pastor Harrison Williams, himself a former refugee from Liberia. "A care group would adopt a refugee family, help get them settled and adjusted to this culture. That process helped open people's eyes to what God was calling us to."

Within two years of starting the ministry in 1994, the church's non-Caucasian population jumped from 6 to 24 percent. Today, that number is in the 30 percent range. Despite the success, Olson admits the adopt-a-family approach wasn't in the church's grand plans.

"There's a principle here," he says. "It's not so much what we're doing or what we've strategized as it is allowing God to guide us and open doors and being willing to step through those doors."

"When we first began, most of us were envisioning a Caucasian congregation that would welcome and embrace African-Americans. That was our first thought. When the doors opened with World Relief to sponsor refugee families, that's when we began to discover what God was really up to."

While the advances on the diversity front have been encouraging, it's the congregation's growing sense of community that excites Olson and Williams most.

To illustrate, Williams tells the story of a couple who recently grieved their stillborn child.

"Members of the congregation came around this couple, who had become completely vulnerable," Williams says. "You are exposed. Everything about you is known. Here is a couple—people who had been raised in an individualistic society—allowing others to come into their house at any time. They were just open."

In a multicultural church, the significance of that kind of interaction can't be underestimated.

"Here we've learned to redefine what we take for granted," Williams says. "What is a friend is a very different (concept) for someone from outside of the U.S. There will be misunderstandings and preconceived ideas."

In actuality, Williams says, there are three cultures in play at Bethel: American culture, Third World culture, and heavenly culture.

"Both U.S. and non-U.S. people have to understand what God defines as a friend or what God defines as love."

On the surface, things change quickly for Bethel's Third World congregation members: the food they eat, the clothes they wear, the way they greet people and the language.

What doesn't change, Williams says, are their feelings and values: their concepts about truth, their motivations, their beliefs about gender and authority roles

A variety of other intentional programs are in play at Bethel, including life groups to connect people cross-culturally in smaller settings and a hospitality ministry designed to "transform strangers into friends and visitors into ministers," but Olson says Bethel's success or failure ultimately rests with God.

"If we did this in our own strength, the wheels would come off very fast," he says. "We don't come at it as if we have the answers. We try to be honest with our questions and to really be a place where we can learn together and grow. God's doing something pretty extraordinary here, but we're in kindergarten in terms of learning and discovery."

Churches in Action

Creating community in upscale condos ...

For years I sat in strategy meetings, trying to find a way to reach people in multi-family housing," says Dick Stafford, associate pastor of North Phoenix (Arizona) Baptist Church.

Indeed, few churches successfully build bridges into large condo complexes. Now some churches are teaming with a ministry called Apartment Life to place Christians in these settings as sort-of chaplains. They're called the CARES teams: Community Activity and Resident Services. In exchange for free rent, which Apartment Life negotiates with apartment owners, CARES teams serve as an apartment community's social hub, welcoming new residents, planning activities, and offering care for residents in times of need.

"Apartment managers desire CARES teams because the sense of community they build improves quality-of-living and decreases tenant turnover," says Stafford. "Our CARES teams, meanwhile, build ministry relationships in these upper class apartment complexes. Our church has six CARES teams."

These teams have coordinated apartment Bible studies, but the greatest benefit may be creating communities where friendship evangelism occurs. Stafford recalls, "One of our CARES men said, 'I never thought of chasing a dog as an evangelism opportunity. But it earned me the right to stop by the owner's apartment and invite him to church.'"

—Drew Zahn

... and in low-income apartments

Low-income apartment complexes abound along Colfax Avenue in Denver and Aurora. "Best we can tell, 90 percent of the people there have no connection to a church," says Pastor Robert Gelinas of Colorado Community Church.

Following the lead of Mission Arlington in Texas, CCC rents an apartment in a complex and creates a church there. Four apartments later, "Lifeboat #14" is going strong.

"We train groups of five to ten people to spend their lives regularly there," Gelinas says. "We rent it and renovate it so it's multipurpose. Then we go door to door, tell people a church is opening up in their apartment building, and ask them to submit a name for it."

After the naming contest, the churches typically start with tutoring and Bible studies for kids, but each is unique. In one, three guys who were into lifting weights started the Gideon 300 Club. They told kids, "As soon as you can do 300 sit-ups, we'll tell you the story of Gideon."

"Kids worked their butts off to get there," says Gelinas. "Then they told them the story: God is looking for a few good men, and you can be the somebody God will use."

"At any of the apartments, you could knock on a door and ask people where their church is, and they'll point to their own apartment building."

—*Brett Lawrence*

Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?

Free government statistics can help you understand your changing community.

Church members often report the changes in the neighborhood anecdotally: "We don't see as many kids around here as we used to" or "Did you notice the old hospital is being converted into condos?"

Without good information, churches may continue ministries for decades after the people those programs were designed for have moved away. But local parish ministry can thrive when you understand the parish.

One of the best sources of demographic information is free and online: the 2000 U.S. Census. The web address is AmericanFactfinder.gov.

The data from the U.S. Census Bureau can tell you who lives in the neighborhood, their age, sex, race, and average income. Census data can show how representative of its community a congregation is. Information can also be used to identify opportunities for service. Some churches in more affluent areas, for example, may not realize there are sizable numbers of people in need within or nearby their neighborhoods. Or churches may detect a growing number of émigrés of a particular nationality or ethnic group.

My easy map quest

Usually local congregations draw membership from only part of a town. Citywide and

countywide data can mask significant demographic differences within the region. The U.S. Census is one of the few sources of demographic information on a sub-municipality level.

Searching smaller areas prior to the 2000 census was a major problem. With more than 8-million blocks and one census tract for every 4,000 people in the nation, dissecting the data for smaller areas was almost impossible. The government website solves this problem with its "enter a street address" feature.

The user enters the address of the church. A map is created showing major streets and the boundaries of nearby census blocks and tracts. The map can be moved in all directions. With tract and block numbers in hand, these plots can be easily searched.

Another new feature is the creation of custom thematic maps. These maps can communicate information easier than data tables. For example, they can show in color which sections of a city have the highest median age.

The U.S. Census also provides annual population estimates by county and city. These supplement the more detailed decadal census and are useful for areas experiencing rapid population change. The government also provides special studies of significant demographic changes that have social and political importance. An example of one such study was grandparents as child care givers.

Other federal statistical data, such as education levels and crime stats, are available on the website factfinder.census.gov. These statistics are not usually broken down to the sub-municipality level but may be useful in understanding your community.

—*Ted Kruse*
Baltimore, Maryland

Copyright © 2003 by the author or Christianity Today/*Leadership Journal*.
[Click here](#) for reprint information on *Leadership Journal*.

Other Community Impact Articles

[Wizard of Odds](#)

Interview with Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin

Leadership Journal, Spring 2003

