

Opportunity House – a “church without walls”



One of the two ministry emphases highlighted in our synod is Mission Development in NC. The Rev. Ernie Hinojosa, Director for Evangelical Mission in the North Carolina Synod, gives us a glimpse of an exciting new ministry in Kannapolis. Pictured here and mentioned in Pastor Hinojosa’s story is intern Christian Harmon (right), a member of Calvary Lutheran Church, Concord, and Dan Talbert, volunteer director of Opportunity House.

As the Director for Evangelical Mission in the North Carolina synod, I partner with our bishop and bishop’s staff to serve the 200+ congregations of the synod. One of my primary responsibilities is in the area of outreach, for both new and existing congregations. As you might expect from a mission-minded synod like ours, our office gets regular inquiries from leaders looking for new approaches to outreach.

And, to be honest, many of these inquiries are accompanied by a fair measure of frustration as outreach strategies of the past fall flat. Leaders want to try new things, but are faced with a common list of apparent obstacles to new ministry:

1. Lack of funds – it’s hard to find resources for new things when you’re struggling to just keep the lights on and the pastor paid
2. Lack of young people – older folks are often less vigorous than they used to be, while younger people can be too busy, uninterested, or absent altogether
3. Poor demographics – outside of a few suburbs, most of our congregations are located in areas of slow or no population growth – and even outright population decline

What to do?

About a year ago I became acquainted with a ministry that appears to be thriving, despite sharing many of these apparent obstacles to outreach. The ministry is called “Opportunity House,” located in Kannapolis, NC. It is a joint ministry of the ELCA and United Methodist Church, and may offer hope to the frustrated.

Opportunity House began four years ago as a Bible study group of about a dozen retired men studying the book of Acts at Midway UMC in Kannapolis. The men noticed the bold, yet humble way that Jesus and his disciples served others in need. What would happen if this bunch of “old guys,” as they called themselves, endeavored to do likewise? They determined to find out.

The men committed themselves to doing simple things for those down on their luck: offering transportation to those with no vehicle of their own, helping unemployed people find clothing suitable for a job interview, helping homeless people find a hot meal, lending a hand to people evicted from apartments with no one to help them move out, and many other simple, inexpensive, practical things. It doesn't take much money or know-how to do such things, only some time and a desire to care for people at a point of need. After each encounter, they would pray for their new friends and invite them to join in the Bible study. Join they did.

Today there is still a Tuesday Bible study, along with a Thursday evening meal and worship service (called "Narrow Gate") to go along with the usual everyday helping ministries that started it all. Close to 200 people will attend the Narrow Gate meal/worship service this Thursday evening. They have literally run out of room for new people, but the Lord finds a way to pack them into the Midway UMC fellowship hall. And more turn up every week. There are no paid staff and little money. Most everything they have and give away comes from donations. Opportunity House is 100% lay-led, with a 70-year-old retired schoolteacher named Dan Talbert as volunteer director. Dan may have debilitating rheumatoid arthritis, but he has more fire in his belly than most people half his age. There is a pastor who assists from time to time, but the laity run the show.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Home Mission Foundation of the North Carolina synod, the ELCA will have an "intern" serving part-time at Opportunity House. His name is Christian Harmon, a member of Calvary Lutheran, Concord and a student at UNC, Charlotte (see accompanying picture of Christian alongside director Dan Talbert). Christian has been serving as a volunteer leader at Opportunity House almost since its inception. He will now be formally tasked with learning the ins and outs of the ministry and preparing to teach others, within the ELCA and beyond, how to do likewise.

If you are a church member, lay leader, church staff, or pastor looking for a way to renew your congregation, and if you're willing to serve "the last, the least, and the lost" in simple yet important ways, this ministry idea may be for you. Send an email to ehinojosa@nclutheran.org and I'll be glad to give you more details.