

From Cold Water to Living Water

by Rev. Chris Singer

Many times we are looking for ways to reach out to our community. We are invited by all kinds of advertising firms to invest our church dollars into mailers and the purchase of zip code mailings. Or we are enticed to buy ads in local phone books, newspapers, and with realtors. While these can be effective tools for outreach, most evangelism budgets shake under the cost of such a venture.

It was no different for me when I received the call to serve as Minister of Evangelism at St. John's Lutheran Church in Orange, California. Our local outreach budget was zero with all the evangelism dollars spoken for by our outstanding support of some world mission work. I began to wonder what kind of an event we could offer that would attract non-Christians to our campus. With no dollars in the bank it seemed impossible. Until ... once again ... God showed me the power of His love and passion for the lost.

I realized that there was an event already happening on our campus that simply wasn't being utilized to its fullest for evangelism. Every year our city promotes the Orange International Street Fair on Labor Day Weekend. Our church is only one block away from this event. Each year this fair averages 400,000 people. In years past our youth department made an opportunity to raise money for their trips by charging people to park in our lots and go one block down to the street fair. With so many people attending the Street Fair, it proved to be and remains still a very good fundraiser.

That's when I got an idea. How could we take advantage of this great opportunity? Thousands of people are walking right by our campus! Knowing that many people have bitter feelings toward the church, and even a greater number are simply unaware of who we are as Lutherans, we decided to initiate contact with as many of these people as possible within this great window of opportunity.

I decided that we would offer a free bottle of water to everyone who passed by our campus on these three hot days. So the work began.

First I shared the idea with the staff and they were very supportive. With their support, we began to publicize the "Street Fair Outreach." We needed water, and a lot of it! So we made announcements in all of our worship services about six weeks before the actual weekend. We invited members to participate by donating a case or two of water. We also invited them to participate by volunteering their time to come and hand out the water. We encouraged the whole church to join in prayer for this outreach event. The next day our church office began to fill with cases and cases of water. Our congregation was so excited at the chance of sharing this free drink of water with the Street Fair attendees that we gathered 6,000 bottles of water! Most was donated by our congregation, with the addition of two donations from major food chains in our area.

Now that we had gathered the water, we had to figure out a way to get it cold enough to hand out ice cold water at the hottest times of the day—once we saw the amount of water, we knew that our church refrigerator wouldn't do! But God answered our prayers again through His church. A couple who owns a trucking company stepped forward and volunteered to donate a refrigerated truck for the weekend. At 53 feet long it definitely accommodated every bit of our water and got all of it cold at once.

With the water cold and ready to be passed out, we gathered a team of eager volunteers to hand it out. Our goal was to let people know that the water was as free to them as the love of God in Christ. We assigned the volunteer to teams in order move water from the truck into buckets and on to two water stations where others would hand them out. Each person who received a bottle of water would also be invited to a special outdoor worship service featuring our praise band, which would be held on Sunday night. CD players at both water stations played our band's CD as we gave out business cards that featured our logo, worship schedule, Web site, and an invitation to visit.

Because we wanted to take the opportunity to let people know more about us, we hosted tours of our historic sanctuary, complete with a history of the building and a one-song concert from our majestic pipe organ. Additionally, we had two members who presented a free exhibit of Christian artists who each created works around the theme: Messages of Worldwide Hope—God revealed through different cultures.

The effect was incredible. The ability to share the love of Christ in such a practical way literally shocked people, as they couldn't believe we would give them a bottle of water for free. God used this to start so many discussions about what we believe and know about God's love for us in Jesus. Others visited the art show and received a powerful visual testimony of God's love. This event helped to make a good impression on everyone; it simply showed that our family of believers expected nothing in return, but wanted only to share out of a love that was first given to us.



One lady came up to me and asked, "Why are you doing this?" I answered, "Because God has given us so much we want to share it with you." I spoke with her for 10 minutes about who we were and what we believe. She thanked me and hurried across the street to where some other friends were waiting. I overheard her say, "That's a really neat church."

Tips

We also used some powerful resources that really made a difference in helping the people in our church to find confidence in sharing the Gospel:

- First we offered a course titled ***Becoming a Contagious Christian*** put out by Zondervan and written by Bill Hybels. With a few doctrinal changes in the explanation we have found that the practical and hands-on approach has really motivated our people to be open to sharing their faith.
- The second resource I found helpful is a book titled the ***Contagious Church*** by Mark Mittleberg. It helped me think in new and different ways about how to practice evangelism in a church.
- In addition, we had a two-hour orientation meeting before the event in which we coached our volunteers as to the purpose, our prayers, and what to say. We explained that some might refuse the water even though it was free and that it was important not to be "pushy." We also coached our volunteers in how to quickly share the law and Gospel with others. We stressed the importance of personal testimony regarding what God had done in their lives and the difference

Jesus and His church has made for them. Finally, we told our volunteers not to feel as if they needed to answer every question. Rather, if they encountered someone with many questions, we had the LCMS home page site available that offered explanations to many topics, as well as our church phone number and pastor's name so those interested could inquire more deeply into these subjects.

- Our Sunday night worship service moved outdoors that weekend where I gave a sermon on the "Woman at the Well" and preached about Christ, the Living Water. We had many people stop and listen and our evangelism team was able to speak to several families who are now visiting our church.

The event was so well supported by our congregation that it will be an annual event and will be added our local evangelism budget. A team is developing around this event, and the volunteer list is already growing for next year. In May, we will all meet together to dream, and plan for, the expansion of this successful outreach.

Reminder

WHEN REACHING OUT KEEP IN MIND...

1. Cover the event with prayer before, during, and after. We actually had our prayer team meet with volunteers before each shift and lead them in a prayer.
2. Be bold and brave. Many corporations would love the tax write-off, the publicity, and the good will and are willing to donate generously.
3. Know your resources. God has given to you and your church some unique gifts. Research the talents and gifts of your people and begin to think about ways to encourage and implement them into evangelism.
4. Before you invite visitors in, clean house! Make sure that if you invite them to visit your Web page it is up-to-date and user-friendly. Make sure your grounds are well kept. And if holding a special event, make sure you make it as excellent as you are able in order to honor the opportunity of a first impression.
5. Consider using an evangelism curriculum before your event. It will help your people gain some confidence and understanding that evangelism isn't a "gift" as much as it is something Christ asks all His disciples to do. Each person has a unique gift of sharing the love of Christ; they do not all need to be a Billy Graham, Oswald Hoffman, or Greg Laurie.

