



Sunday, February 6, 2005

Changing the Focus

Mark A. Taylor

A new book, "The Externally Focused Church," challenges Christians to meet needs, offer service, and build relationships outside the boundaries of church buildings and programs. The week's issue focuses on the book.

Why Not the Church?

Paul S. Williams

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Who Cares If My Church Is Here?

Rick Rusaw

Externally focused churches are determined to make a difference in society.

An Interview with the Authors

Paul S. Williams, interviewer

Editor-at-large Paul Williams talked with Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw about their book, "The Externally Focused Church." This is an excerpt of that conversation.

A Revolution of Grace (a review of "The Externally Focused Church")

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This book has the potential for igniting a magnificent paradigm shift.

Building Bridges in a Small Town

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With service throughout its community, the Christian Church of Estes Park, Colorado, is demonstrating the spirit of a new book, "The Externally Focused Church."



FROM THE EDITOR

Changing the Focus

BY MARK A. TAYLOR

Maybe we'll do better in this neighborhood, I thought as my wife and I moved to a different house almost two years ago. The street where we'd lived for 20 years was populated with non-Christians, nominal Christians, and at least one Buddhist. A couple of them had come to church with us once or twice. But as we backed out of our driveway the last time, I knew I had failed as an evangelist among them.

A new address offered a fresh start. And we have tried, really we have tried.

My wife accepted the invitation to attend the neighborhood ladies' monthly Pokeno parties. One in particular stands out. We made a point of seeing *The Passion of the Christ* last spring just before the next get-together. "I want to be ready to respond when they bring it up," my wife said. But afterwards her voice was flat, her expression downcast. "All they talked about was *The Bachelorette* and *Survivor*," she said.

One of these neighbors is married to a man who worked with one of our church's elders. We invited both couples for dinner and then went together to

our church's Christmas pageant. The next summer my wife took their daughter and another neighborhood girl to our Vacation Bible School. We counted these as greater successes than the response after I invited eight neighbor

THIS IS OUR MISSION FIELD: THE TROUBLED WORLD OUTSIDE CHURCH BUILDINGS AND PROGRAMS.

couples to our "40 Days of Purpose" small group. At Pokeno, one of the women told my wife, "I saw that book in the store. I'd like to read it." But no neighbors joined our group.

I'm not beating myself over this. We are trying to live as Christians among the non-Christians around us, and we're beginning to forge relationships with some of them. But as I skimmed *The*

Externally Focused Church and read this week's articles about the book, I came to a realization. I am an "internally focused" Christian. My efforts at "witnessing" have centered around trying to get non-Christians *out of* their comfort zone and *into* mine.

This mirrors the approach of many local congregations today: "Look at all we offer. Invite your non-Christian friends to come enjoy it." But this new book challenges Christians to meet needs, offer service, and build relationships *outside* the boundaries of church buildings and programs. This is our mission field (and, incidentally, the place where Christ spent so much of his ministry): The teeming, troubled world where decay needs salt; where confusion longs for light; where people burdened with boredom and fear search for the leaven of purpose and hope.

Christ offers what they need. He can touch them best and first through me, in my neighborhood. As Joe Ellis says (page 8), that's a shift of focus that is both simple and revolutionary.

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Cover photos provided by the Christian Church of Estes Park in Colorado.

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Standard
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We accept freelance submissions. Articles should be double-spaced, typed on one side of the page only. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) for replies and return of unused manuscripts.

Volume CXL, Number 6. CHRISTIAN STANDARD (ISSN 0009-5656), published weekly at 8121 Hamilton Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45231. Periodicals postage paid at Cincinnati, Ohio, and additional offices. Printed in USA. Postmaster: Send address changes to Standard Publishing, 8121 Hamilton Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45231. Phone: 1-800-543-1301 or 1-513-931-4050. Subscription rates: \$26.99 per year plus \$5.00 postage/handling (plus sales tax in FL and WA; \$10.00 postage/handling per year for Canadian subscriptions; \$12.50 for Mexico and all other foreign subscriptions). Two to 14 copies to one address, \$20.00 each/yearly; \$5.50 each/quarterly.* Fifteen to 34 copies to one address, \$19.00 each/yearly; \$5.25 each/quarterly. Thirty-five or more copies to one address, \$18.00 each/yearly; \$5.00 each/quarterly. (*Add 9 percent postage/handling when ordering multiple copies.) Send address changes to CHRISTIAN STANDARD, 8121 Hamilton Ave., Cincinnati, OH 45231. Send old and new addresses, complete with zip numbers, at least six weeks before delivery date. This publication is available in microform from UMI by calling 800-521-0600 toll-free.

E-mail: christianstd@standardpub.com
Web site: www.christianstandard.com

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AND SO IT GOES

Why Not the Church?

BY PAUL S. WILLIAMS

It had been a busy day, and we decided to unwind with a long walk around the lake at Disney's planned community called Celebration.

Celebration was built on some of the last swampland Walt Disney purchased in Central Florida. Just beyond the theme park boundaries the folks at Disney created a place people could call home. A collection of tree-lined streets, gingerbread houses, and quaint shops comprise the town. The tallest spire belongs to the local movie house, the Celebration Theater. It seems fitting that the town the mouse built is now paying homage to its founder—the American entertainment industry.

As we walked around the man-made lake in the center of town, my good friend Rick Rusaw looked across the water and said, "Why is the theater the central focal point of town? Why not the church?"

"Why not the church?" I echoed. The reason the church is no longer in the central public square is not a result of the separation of church and state. It is a result of the church's willingness to take

RICK BEGAN TO WONDER ALOUD WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THE CHURCH SPEARHEADED A NEW BUILDING DEVELOPMENT IN HIS TOWN.

itself out of the public arena as it creates a parallel universe on its own patch of real estate.

Rick looked across to the theater and said, "That is the position First Christian Church (now LifeBridge) should have in Longmont. And not by

building the highest spire either, but by having the highest profile. By having our most valuable asset, our people, involved in virtually every aspect of community life."

Rick began to wonder aloud what would happen if the church spearheaded a new building development in his town, one that encouraged neighborliness and community.

LifeBridge Christian Church has now purchased 400 acres of land, and it is in the process of developing a planned community with housing, shops, a community college, and the church, not a movie theater, at the center of it all.

In this week's CHRISTIAN STANDARD, we interviewed Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, co-authors of the popular new book, *The Externally Focused Church*. We think you'll find their story exciting.

Sometimes all it takes is a long walk to open the gates of creativity.

SEEN & HEARD

BY SIMON J. DAHLMAN

More tornadoes were reported in the United States in 2004 than at any time since records have been kept. The good news is that the national death toll was far below the annual average. There were 1,555 tornadoes recorded in the country through September, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Even without figures for the final three months, that breaks the record set in 1998 by more than 130. The higher numbers do not necessarily mean more tornadoes are occurring than in the past, say researchers, but may just reflect improved reporting systems.

—Associated Press, January 3

Faith-based groups received \$1.17 billion in grants from five federal agencies in 2003, and President George W. Bush now wants states to send more of the federal social-service money they administer to faith-based organizations. An additional \$40 billion in federal money is given out by state governments, according to Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, and many states do not realize that federal rules now allow them to fund these organizations. **To encourage states to funnel money toward faith-based groups**, the White House has hosted a series of conferences, Towey has met with state

leaders, and Bush has personally lobbied governors. The White House office also is providing states with technical assistance in setting up their own faith-based offices.

—Associated Press, January 3

"Glory is to God what style is to an artist. A painting by Vermeer, a sonnet by Donne, a Mozart aria—each is so rich with the style of the one who made it that to the connoisseur it couldn't have been made by anybody else, and the effect is staggering."

—Frederick Buechner, minister and author, from *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (HarperCollins, 1993)

THE Externally

Who Cares If My Church Is Here?

BY RICK RUSAW

The riveting questions asked by *The Externally Focused Church* are these: “If your church were to close its doors or relocate to a different community, would it be missed by the community? Would your community weep? Would anybody even notice? Would anybody care?” The book seeks to answer these questions by weaving the story of one church’s impact (LifeBridge Christian Church in Longmont, Colorado) on the community amid a backdrop of biblical principles and compelling examples from scores of churches across the country.

DEFINITIONS

The majority of churches in the United States focus on what happens *inside* the church. These internally focused churches concentrate on getting people *out of the community and into the church*. These churches may create powerful worship experiences, excel in teaching, offer thriving youth programs, and have vibrant small groups, but success is measured by the number of people and activities inside the church. These are good churches filled with good people. And what they do is vital but not sufficient for a healthy church.

By contrast, externally focused churches are internally strong, but look outward. They concentrate on getting their people *out of the church and into the community*. Their external focus is reflected in the way they build their staff and their budget. Because they

engage their communities with the good works and good news of Jesus Christ, their communities are better places to live. These churches look for ways to be useful to their communities, to be a part of its hopes and dreams. They build bridges to their communities instead of walls around themselves. They determine their effectiveness not

only by internal measures—such as attendance, worship, teaching, and small groups—but also by external measures—the spiritual and societal effects they are having on the communities around them. They ask, “Whose lives are different because of this church?” Nearly everything done inside the church should prepare and equip people for personal growth and personal impact. As with every church, externally focused churches have problems and challenges, but they are determined to make a difference in society. Internally focused churches may help individuals, but externally focused churches change the world.

This book is written with two types of churches in mind. First is the *externally committed* church. These churches are already externally focused in what they do, but they want to learn what others are doing so they can excel even more. They may want to increase the frequency of service or the depth of that service—moving from service into relationship. This type of church also wants to learn how to leverage and increase its impact by beginning new ministries or partnering with existing efforts.

The book also targets *externally curious* churches. These churches have heard about this growing movement and want more information on how to become an externally focused church. They ask,

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Members of LifeBridge Christian Church volunteer as part of the continuing Boulder County (Colorado) Open Space project.

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“How did they do it?” and “How can we do it?”

CHARACTERISTICS

Regardless of size, location, or denomination, externally focused churches have four characteristics in common.

- **These churches are convinced that good deeds and good news can't and shouldn't be separated.** Just as it takes two wings to lift an airplane off the ground, so externally focused churches couple good news with good deeds to make an impact on their communities. The good deeds, expressed in service and ministry to others, validate the good news. The good news explains the purpose of the good deeds. Ministry and service is the relational bridge over which the good news travels.

These churches have broken free from “either or” to embrace “both and.” They seek to save the lost *and* serve the least. They are full of grace *and* truth. Without contradiction they believe that changing individuals leads to a changed community *and* a changed community leads to changed individuals. They are seeking to be both salt and light.

For externally focused churches, engaging the community with good news and good deeds is not just a tactic or a program, it is their core for being—it is who they are. These churches have concluded that it's really not “church” if it's not engaged in the life of the community through ministry and service to others.

- **Externally focused churches see themselves as vital to the health and well-being of their communities.** They believe their communities, with all their aspirations and challenges, cannot be truly healthy without the church's involvement. Because they see themselves as the “soul” of the community, they have moved beyond thinking about the church's health apart from the community . . . to what the community would be like apart from the church.

These churches recognize that God has placed them in their communities (whether they feel wanted or not) to be salt, light, and leaven. They recognize that the way to enter into the life and conversation of the community is through serving at the intersection of where the city needs help, where God has a stated interest (as with children, immigrants, poor, elderly, handicapped, etc.), and where the church has capacity to serve.

Because they don't seek to create something in their community if it already exists, these churches frequently form partnerships with schools and human service agencies that are “morally positive and spiritually neutral”—people of good faith working together with people of good will. They have discovered that “servants can go anywhere.” As they serve their light shines brighter, and their salt becomes saltier.

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BUT DEMONSTRATED.**

- **These churches believe that ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living.** Even more, they believe that Christians grow best when they are serving and giving themselves away to others. They are captivated not only by Ephesians 2:8, 9 (we are saved by grace through faith) but also by Ephesians 2:10 (“ . . . we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do”).

Because service and ministry are part of their growth model for the church and the spiritual formation of its people, it is not unusual for huge percentages of their congregations to serve and

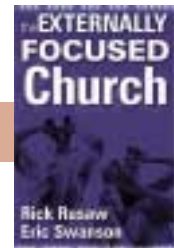
minister outside the walls of the church. They are convinced that Christians can learn through good instruction but cannot grow unless they are involved in ministry and service to others. Given enough opportunities, every Christian will find the intersection of their passion and God's purpose.

- **Externally focused churches are evangelistically effective.** It's no secret that the church in North America is not hitting the ball out of the park evangelistically. While the U.S. population grew by 9 percent between 1992 and 1999, the median adult attendance per church service dropped 12 percent during the same time frame. The book is loaded with examples of churches that are seeing hundreds of people come to faith because of the new relationships formed through engaging the community.

Externally focused churches recognize that evangelism is the ultimate motive; it is not, however, an ulterior motive. The world longs for authenticity and the greatest apologetic to a doubting world isn't merely postulated but demonstrated.

Apart from the compelling examples of externally focused churches, the book is very practical in addressing the salient issues of externally focused churches. Issues like assessing the needs of your community, vision, staffing, volunteers, funding, and partnering are all addressed. Each chapter ends with four sections for discussion and application—“Something to Think About,” “Something to Talk About,” “Something to Act Upon,” and a “Sermon/Lesson Idea” complete with text, illustrations, and application points. These features make *The Externally Focused Church* highly useful for individuals, small groups, or leadership teams.

Rick Rusaw, senior minister with LifeBridge Christian Church, Longmont, Colorado, wrote *The Externally Focused Church* with Eric Swanson.



An Interview with the Authors

BY PAUL WILLIAMS

Editor-at-large Paul Williams talked with Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw about their book. This is an excerpt of that conversation.

PAUL WILLIAMS: You two have coauthored an excellent resource, *The Externally Focused Church*. Eric, what led you to partner with Rick in writing this book?

Eric Swanson: The Leadership Network began sensing something was happening with the churches in America, in terms of finding new ways to serve the community. But they couldn't think of it outside of urban churches. What are urban churches doing to engage the community? I traveled all around the country for them, visiting churches, and I began to feel it was more than just an urban thing.



Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, the authors of The Externally Focused Church.

Rural and suburban areas also?

Swanson: Suburban and rural churches were orienting themselves to the community, which was causing them to think differently. When they talked about church, it wasn't just how many people they could bring into the build-

ing, but it was asking what impact they were having on the community. When I talked with people here in Colorado about the project, they would invariably say, "Have you been to the LifeBridge Christian Church in Longmont?" I put it on my to-do list.

When Rick and I got together to talk, there was an instant resonance of ideas. We began talking about the biblical mandate for reaching into the community.

In Acts 10 God lowered the sheet and said to Peter, "It's gonna be done a new way." Then Peter went to the house of Cornelius and began to understand, the gospel needed to be taken into all communities. The church doesn't wait for the world to come to them. It's the church

that goes out into the community. In Acts 13 God sent out Paul and Barnabas to Gentile cities in the Mediterranean region. It created quite a debate that resulted in the Jerusalem Council, proving people did not need to become Jews before they became Christians.

It was a major shift in thinking. How can we serve the community in which we live?

What was it that led LifeBridge to see the need to move in that direction?

Rick Rusaw: I thought the church was doing a good job of reaching lost

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people by saying, “Here we are if you need us.” And I realized we didn’t have a voice out there in the community. We didn’t have a voice because Christians had withdrawn from everything in the community to focus their lives on the church.

I realized we didn’t have the right to speak to the community’s life because we Christians had created our own little universe. We had withdrawn from the discussion. So we just said, “How are we gonna reach these people?” It seemed like the best way to do that was to come alongside and help them do the things they were already doing. So it wasn’t like this great vision. It was common sense.

What were the first two or three events you did, and how did you prepare your church for it?

Rusaw: It really started with the school thing. We were asked to start a Christian school and we decided we wouldn’t for a number of reasons. One, we didn’t want to start a Christian school. Two, if we did start one, the most students we could enroll was 675, and that was a small percentage of the total population. And three, we wanted to have an impact on the whole community—to engage the community, not withdraw from it. And so we went to principals we knew and asked if we could help out in their schools. That launched us into the schools, as we began helping out wherever we could.

Your involvement with the schools has been extensive, hasn’t it?

Rusaw: We got plugged in at any level where we could help things that already existed. Rather than create a ministry, which is oftentimes what churches do, we said, “Let’s not be in competition, but let’s cooperate. Let’s go find out who’s doing it and see if we

can help them. And we don’t care if our name gets attached to it.” So there’s a lot of stuff going on all over town that’s being done by LifeBridge people, but they don’t wear their LifeBridge shirts and the people there don’t necessarily know that LifeBridge is the one bringing their volunteers to the table. They figure it out after awhile, though.

And how does that happen?

Swanson: When I visited Rick he was speaking at an elementary school. What do you think? There were 40 teachers in that room. And Rick led them through a personality test, and they loved it. He didn’t say where he was from, but you know the teachers from his church said to their friends later, “That’s my pastor.” It’s almost like Jesus’ strategy. Don’t tell anyone.

Rusaw: And the connection to the church comes because of the relationship. I’m convinced nothing happens outside

relationships anywhere in the world, and the church has kind of done the insider piece. We’re good to each other. But the average community residents don’t get our language. They don’t know us, and they feel we’ve kind of abandoned them, so to speak. Now they see someone working shoulder to shoulder with them, and conversation comes up about life in general, and the Christian has a chance to say, “I don’t have all the answers, but you know I get a lot of help from my relationship with Christ, and from my friends at LifeBridge.” And that’s all it takes. It may not be the next Sunday, or even the next year, but eventually there’s a good chance they’ll come to a worship service at LifeBridge.

How do you explain the positive reaction *Externally Focused Church* has received?

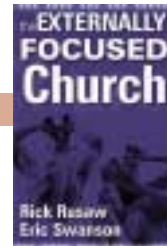
Swanson: I think there’s a lot of pent-up energy within the church. People have listened to sermons for years about what they ought to do, but they don’t know how to do it. How do they relate to people outside the church? And so when given the opportunity, they’ll read about it. Based on Ephesians 2:10, they get the idea God has good works prepared in advance for them to do. The book helps them understand that, and how to do it, and they feel so alive doing it, they know they’ve hit the right thing.

Rusaw: You’re not asking them to teach, you’re not asking them to go make an evangelistic presentation, you’re just asking them to help. And people get the helping part. One pastor said, “Either this is a wave we’ve started or it’s a wave God’s blessing.” But it’s going on all over the place. It’s happening internationally. And so I do believe there’s this groundswell of desire to do something to serve people in the communities where we live.



Kelly Karpenske and another volunteer from LifeBridge Christian Church clean windows at a facility housing Alternatives for Youth, a local nonprofit agency that assists teens in need.

THE *Externally* FOCUSED CHURCH



A Revolution of Grace

A REVIEW BY JOE ELLIS

As I began reading the words of Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson in *The Externally Focused Church*, I thought of the story about the Native American who was sending messages by smoke signals. He saw in the distance the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb test and exclaimed, “I wish I had said that!”

During my lifetime I have seen the influence of three powerful movements in churches. One was the ideal of restoring the church to the faith, character, unity, and power of the first church. Building on this was a second emphasis known as the church growth movement, which has called the church to focus on fulfilling Jesus’ commission more responsibly.

Peter Drucker has called the third and current movement among churches the most important social phenomenon in American society in 30 years. Rusaw and Swanson’s book heralds this movement that focuses the church outward to servanthood in its mission field. It defines ministry as “meeting another’s need with the resources God has given you.” It properly suggests that in doing this we encounter Jesus most directly. If we want to be near the Shepherd we must go where the Shepherd is and help him. I believe this movement has the elements of a “great awakening,” a revolution of grace for individual Christians, churches, and entire communities. This refocus has incredible potential to empower the church to impact the world for good and for salvation.

Those who want to be authentic

disciples of Jesus and want their churches to be authentic should read—and heed—this book. It provides an understanding of, and help for joining, this movement to serve and evangelize the people around them.

CRUCIAL ELEMENTS

This book is fresh and incisive. It is exceptional amid the flood of books being published today, and I hope it does not get lost in the information overload. It is unique in that it combines three elements: information, experience, and transformation.

In providing information, the book makes an iron-clad case for the biblical

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directive that the church exists not for itself, but to carry out Jesus’ commission to serve and save the world. The case from Scripture is so strong that naysayers will be hard pressed to deny it. If someone were to collect all the clear and imperative Bible passages that mandate this outward focus it would comprise a sizeable book. Why, then, have so many churches not seen this perfectly obvious directive and obeyed it before now?

Churches talk a lot about the Great Commission; but, in the words of the maxim, “When all is said and done, more has been said than done.” An externally focused church does what

others only verbalize.

Throughout history some of the greatest movements have sprung up when a paradigm-shifter rediscovered something that was perfectly obvious but blocked from view by old habits of thinking and acting. Then, once people see it afresh, they are amazed that they had not seen it before. The externally focused church emphasis is such an idea whose time has come. This book has the potential for igniting a magnificent paradigm shift to a future that we can hardly imagine.

For more than 60 years Drucker has been considered the father of modern corporate management. One of his axioms is: “Any organization begins to die the day it begins to be run for the benefit of the insiders and not for the benefit of the outsiders.”*

This book puts a magnifying glass on the critical pivot point between two fundamental categories of churches: those focused internally, and those externally focused. This creates a watershed between authentically effective churches and stagnant or declining ones. Some readers who would say their church is externally focused will be surprised at how fully their churches fit the description of an internally focused church.

This external-focus principle is an application of Jesus’ paradox: serve yourself and die; forget yourself—be crucified with Christ—and live. Seek your life and lose it; lose your life in God’s service and find it. Seek to be served and miss out on abundant living; seek to serve and find the abundant

life here and Heaven, too. For many churches, success tends to be measured in terms of institutional concerns such as attendance, buildings, and budgets; but if a church is to live, it has to become a “living sacrifice” to the Lord’s enterprise in the world.

As to experience, the principle of the book is authenticated by many examples of real-life churches actually doing what they are advocating. The case studies cover such a wide variety of conditions and locations that every church can identify with at least one of them. The standard cannot be dismissed as “but our situation is different.”

As to transformation, the book processes the principle and its examples so well that the reader is led to change the way he thinks and acts. Each chapter provides exercises to help readers move

The Externally Focused Church (224 pages), by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, is published at \$17.99 by Group Publishing.

to the right side of the watershed so they can, in turn, help to change their churches as well.

TRANSFORMING INSTINCT

The book goes far beyond bolt-on boilerplate programs. It helps to bring a transformation of instinct so that a church can creatively do what is appropriate to its time and place. The authors speak of dealing with the church’s DNA, its innate character that will issue into the right thinking and acting. Satan has undermined churches at the genetic

level to neutralize them by making them self-centered, ingrown, inward-focused, self-serving, distracted, sin-corrupted, and thus passive or inert. They become ineffective or useless for God’s purposes. To become truly effective, a church must undergo transformation at the instinctive or intuitive level so that we find ourselves automatically thinking and acting in accord with the principle. An external focus is not an option; it is in the very genetic code of authentic Christianity.

*Listed as one of the most important lessons churches need to learn from Drucker in Leadership Network’s NetFax, Number 75, July 7, 1997 (www.leadnet.org).

Joe Ellis, retired dean of Cincinnati (Ohio) Bible Seminary, continues to teach, write, and speak in the fields of practical ministry and church growth.

Building Bridges

IN A SMALL TOWN

BY SCOTT WEBER

I don't think this church exists to serve anyone but its own members." Those words (spoken in 1998) hit me like a brick and have stuck with me all these years. I knew the woman who said it was wrong, but I also realized she was expressing the perception of many in the community. What had we done wrong?

The words came at a town planning commission meeting where a review of our plans to purchase a building in the downtown area of Estes Park took place. We had rented in the downtown area until then. It was a shock when the commission and other interested parties objected that a church did not belong downtown. They felt it would take away from the tax base and increase demand for parking. But the comment that cut the deepest was the one from a commission member that the church did not serve the public at large but only its own members.

I reminded them that just down the street from the municipal build-



The Christian Church of Estes Park has helped with many community projects, including helping build Habitat for Humanity homes. This couple is receiving their new home.

ing were "The Old Church Shops," located in a building that served as the Community Church for decades. "Towns used to be built around churches," I reminded them. "The church used to be the vital and driving

force in small communities," I said. But the words fell on deaf ears.

The local newspaper printed the story on the front page, and we received many calls from people who sympathized with us. But the message was clear. Many did not perceive the church as vital or even helpful to this community.

Was name recognition our problem? No. We occasionally sent out postcards to the entire community to advertise a sermon series or special holiday event. We have since created a very informative and interactive Web site (www.funchurch.com). Good signage and an attractive phone book ad are in place. These steps help to attract some people to the church, but usually only those who already

have an interest in church.

Our vision was to reach those who either had no interest in church or felt disenfranchised from the church for some reason. Name recognition was not our real problem. Perception was

the problem (though it seems to be the image of churches in general and not just our congregation).

REAL, RELATIONAL, RELEVANT

The Christian Church of Estes Park is about 10 years old. Founded in November 1994, it struggled to get a healthy start, but regained its focus in late 1996 and has been on a path of growth ever since. After that meeting in 1998, becoming more “Real, Relational, and Relevant” was a higher priority than ever before. These elements speak to the three most common reasons people do not go to church.

Many people do not go to church because they believe the church is full of hypocrites who act one way on Sunday and another way during the week. So we strive to be real, to allow each other to see and know about our current and past weaknesses. Personal testimonies, small groups, and accountability relationships help facilitate this. I also aim for this same vulnerability in my preaching.

Others stay away from church because they don't think they can break into the church culture. So being relational is important. If there is one thing our church does well, it is to warmly welcome and get to know everyone who walks through the doors. If you attend a service, you are likely to get invited to lunch or some creative opportunity designed to get to know the church family.

Others excuse themselves by saying, “The church doesn't speak to what I am facing in life.” So being relevant is a high priority. Our music, preaching, and teaching all endeavor to answer from God's Word the deepest questions and most practical needs that people are facing in their lives.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Our participation in the “40 Days of Purpose” campaign in 2002 was a good experience. The next year we decided to design and implement our own

campaign, “40 Days of Outreach.” We sensed the need to “build bridges into our community” rather than just asking people to come to our church. If those bridges of caring, compassion, service, and friendship were built, then traffic on the bridges would go both ways.

Books like *Conspiracy of Kindness* by Rick Sjogren, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* by Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, and *Churches That Make a Difference* by Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Tolland Unruh, have helped us to see the need to change our focus from primarily internal to external.

The success of the outreach cam-

paign was not to be measured by what happened during the 90-day campaign itself, but by what would take place in the months and years to come. For instance, we stepped up our involvement with Stout Street, an alternative program for convicted felons that allows them to enter into a strict two-year program of rehab instead of doing up to 15 years in jail. Many of these men have come to Christ and become an integral part of our church family. People have been helped with cleaning, packing, loading, and transporting as they move across town or even out of town, and this has sometimes broken down a

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The sign above the door at the Christian Church of Estes Park serves to remind members that a church must look outward to fulfill the Great Commission.

barrier and brought someone into our church family.

Our small groups plan and implement service projects in the community as a way of showing the love of God in a practical way. These pique the interest of some to come to the church for the first time. Our people become more and more convinced that they need to invite their friends, family, and coworkers to church, and it works!

The list could go on, but bridges are being built into the community that eventually bring people back over that bridge and into the church. Once here, our 101 class or a personal visit over coffee at Starbucks often helps to answer their questions and bring them to a decision to accept Christ.

When our external focus became important, we weren't sure how to start. But over time we learned that was OK. It was the condition of our hearts and the willingness to be faithful that mattered.

Sometimes in ministry we assume we need to get everything just so before we can start—that people need to get the whole picture and have complete understanding before they can move forward. But the truth is, all they really need is enough understanding to get started. Part of being externally focused is to build the road as we travel it. We don't need the entire road before we begin the journey, only enough to take the next step (*The Externally Focused Church*, p. 174).

KINGDOM ASSIGNMENT

Our next step was called “The Kingdom Assignment.” In its first phase, it challenged those who attend our church to accept \$100 from God, to use their talents to multiply the money into more, and then give it away to a needy family, individual, or organization in the community that helps those in need. It could not be given back to the church. The participants shared their story by e-mail, letter, or testimony with the church 90 days later.

A generous businessman in Colorado with a heart for externally focused churches donated the funds for us to do this project and, hopefully, pass on the seed money to another church at a later time to do the assignment as well. Future “assignments” are planned to challenge us to use our treasure and time to help make a difference in our community.

Our Kingdom Assignment had a unique approach in our smaller community. Most churches that have participated in the Kingdom Assignment have been large (1,000 to 3,000). They sought involvement from about 10 percent of their attendance. We set a goal to involve at least 50 percent of our average attendance (current attendance about 175). That meant trying

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to include most of our adults and older teens. In a town of about 8,500 permanent residents, that could have an incredible impact!

On September 12, at the end of the worship services, 78 people came forward to accept the assignment. In the following days, another 15 accepted it. With 93 people, more than half of our average attendance (and an overwhelming majority of our adults and teenagers) accepted the assignment.

We had our Celebration Service on December 12. The original \$8,700 we distributed had become more than \$87,000 given to those in need in our community. Some people's projects are still bringing in funds. Participants

shared amazing stories that only God could orchestrate, and the tenfold increase could be explained only by God providing the fruit through willing participants.

Many told how the community itself was excited about the Kingdom Assignment. Many shared how this assignment spurred them to make this a permanent part of their lifestyle. We want to continue to change the community's perception of the church in order to bring glory to God. We are honored to follow in the footsteps of other churches that have done so well at being externally focused, and a good foundation is in place to continue to grow and affect our community.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

It would be great to hear people say, “The Christian Church of Estes Park? Oh yeah, that's the church that helps the needy, picks up trash around the lake, tutors kids at the schools. That church really makes a difference. We need them.” And if that is the perception of the community at large, then we are likely to begin seeing people come to church who haven't been for many years or maybe not at all. In our process of building bridges of service into the community, meaningful relationships will be created, and we will see an increase in that precious commodity of trust. People are more apt to accept our members' personal invitations to come with them to church and to be open to the message of the good news of Jesus.

The Externally Focused Church asks, “If your church vanished, would your community weep? Would anyone notice? Would anyone care?” We want to make sure the Christian Church of Estes Park would be missed. The joyful end of that goal is to bring people into the kingdom of God.

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