

Witness and Mercy in Los Angeles

Location: Peace Lutheran Church, Lake View Terrace, Calif.

THE SCENARIO

In the 1980s and 1990s, Peace Lutheran Church was located in a predominantly African-American area. During this time period violent gangs and the cocaine epidemic began destroying many neighborhoods. The church's membership changed from mostly Caucasian to primarily African-American. The family or close friends of many church members were involved in gangs or drugs.

A large part of church's street ministry is based on easing the fears and prejudice of the welcoming congregation. The ministry also aims to build up contacts with the angry, disillusioned and lost who feel that they have not only burned the last bridges with their families, but also with any church.

THE MINISTRY

As the pastor of a family member or trusted friend I had an "in" with the victims of street life. When a relationship of trust can be built between pastor and lost sheep it becomes much easier for that lost sheep to enter the church. Once the precedence has been established, then reaching others in similar situations becomes easier and more frequent. Many people being reached in these situations also have children in foster homes and broken homes. The children of a chaotic and painful home life are the most vulnerable but typically they also are the most receptive to hearing about God's love. Years ago most of our teenagers came from foster care or single-parent households. They walked alone to church every Sunday. One Sunday I asked them, "Why do you come to church every Sunday? You are not forced to come and you came by yourselves?" And their answer was one I will never forget: "Because we feel loved here." Those broken, at-risk teenagers have now become the core of our young-adult membership and our hopes for the future.

Most city churches are within 10 minutes of a park and most parks in the city have varying numbers of homeless adults spending the day there. Depending on city ordinances, some of them also may be in the park at night. Although many are addicts, prostitutes and petty criminals, they are receptive to prayer, Bible reading, sack lunches or bags of toiletries. If a church visits them regularly, the



homeless eventually will come to cherish those visits as "their church." We had taken a four-year break from ministering to the homeless in a nearby park. When we began again many of the same people were still in the park and one of the ladies asked me about my daughter, Poleen. Despite our absence of four years and the woman's drug addiction and jail stays, she not only remembered me, but also my daughter and her name.

We are a small congregation of about 125 members and an attendance of 60 to 70 weekly. Not only has Peace Lutheran reached out to those in the streets, but it also has reached out to those of all cultures. Martin Luther King said, "Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in Christian America." Churches preach against prejudice but very few live what they preach. We are about 55 percent African-American, 25 percent Hispanic, 10 percent Asian and 10 percent Caucasian. Once a congregation has been sensitized to reach out to those in the streets, then its members can realize the common humanity we all share. This realization then enables them to see and welcome the common humanity they also share with people of different races and culture.

TO LEARN MORE

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