

The Best Place for an Oil Change

With auto mechanics on staff—and its own funeral home—Cedar Park Church in Seattle is redefining how a church can reach a community.

A greasy mechanic bends over the side of a car to replace an oil filter. A well-dressed psychologist reaches across her desk to console a grieving mother. A busy store clerk bags a blue shirt and pants and wishes the customer a good day.

These are snapshots of the changing faces of Cedar Park Church, where the definition of “church” has moved way beyond cushioned pews and Sunday school.

Under Joe Fuiten, pastor of this Seattle-area Assemblies of God church since 1981, the role of his congregation in the community has been stretched. It includes auto maintenance, counseling, retailing, education, funeral and cemetery services, and music productions. It’s all aimed at meeting the needs of local people, not just on Sunday, but also from Monday to Saturday.

“The modern church kind of thinks if they have church on Sunday and Sunday school, then they are a church,” Fuiten says. “What I want is the church to be the center of the community.”

Looking Under the Hood

At Cedar Park, it’s church 24/7, and the evidence of it is all around in a variety of forms—from hymnals to oil filters to pullover shirts to Algebra lessons in the classroom. To help meet the needs of its community, the church has four car mechanics on staff. They offer daily repairs and a fix-your-car day once a month when the costs are for parts only.

The church recently opened a 15,000-square-foot thrift clothing store—and sold \$3,000 in merchandise on opening day. Cedar Park even has a funeral home and a cemetery. In addition, there is a sound studio for recording; a private school that is the largest in the state, with a K through 12 enrollment of 1,536 students; an after-school arts program; and a staff of eight licensed counselors.

No matter the ministry, it's all aimed at linking the church with the community to provide connections for sharing Christ while solving people's day-to-day problems.

"We create ministries outside of the church setting," Fuiten says. "We relate the mechanic to the Good Samaritan. The modern-day equivalent to the Good Samaritan is repairing vehicles."

Three years ago, Craig Brandenburg left his own car-maintenance business to begin an auto-repair shop at Cedar Park. He's part mechanic, part minister.

"It's been pretty incredible," Brandenburg says. "I'm overwhelmed daily with calls."

Government agencies funnel people with clunkers Brandenburg's way, causing his workload as well as his chances for outreach to increase. The leap from repairing a car to testifying about Jesus isn't so far, he says. That's because he views a helping hand results in a receptive ear from a customer.

"People [who are] down-and-out get connected to the church," Brandenburg says. "We've had people saved."

He's found that fixing a sputtering engine is more effective than door-to-door evangelizing at pointing people God's way. "We just try to show the love of Christ," says Brandenburg, who also repairs donated cars and sells them.

Payments, whether for car repairs, counseling sessions or

funeral arrangements, are based on a sliding-fee scale that is set according to a person's income. "People pay what they can afford," Brandenburg explains.

Serving Is Job-One

Cedar Park is the 19th largest nonprofit corporation in Washington state, just behind Children's Home Society of Washington and Greater Lakes Mental Healthcare, and ahead of Pacific Northwest Ballet and Woodland Park Zoological Society. The four religious nonprofits that are larger than Cedar Park are World Vision, Crista Ministries, Catholic Community Services and Tacoma Life Center.

In what is considered one of the most unchurched states in the country, Cedar Park continues to flourish, growing in attendance while neighboring mainline Protestant churches decline. When someone asks how big Cedar Park is, Fuiten says, "It depends on when you're counting."

If you count the Spanish- and Japanese-language services, the private school, and the seven satellite campuses where services are held, then more than 5,000 people regularly attend. But Fuiten emphasizes that Cedar Park isn't just the people worshipping in the sanctuary of the main campus on Sunday mornings.

"That is certainly one part of who we are, and an important one, but that is not Cedar Park," he stresses. "What I think the church's job is, is to serve people, not just to worship in a service."

"Joe is quite a visionary," says Lee Bolen, a deacon and church-board member. "He always seems to be one step ahead of us. When you think of traditional churches, it's pretty different [from] what we're trying to do."

In January, Cedar Park purchased a vacant church building in a neighboring city for \$200,000 less than the original asking

price of \$650,000. It will double as a church and music studio. The director of the studio comes with an impressive résumé—having produced more than 500 albums and overseen the third-largest studio in the country.

Explaining his vision for the facility, which also is the church's newest ministry, Fuiten explains: "You hope a lot of CDs come out of that studio. You hope it makes enough money to pay for the rent of the building. So, essentially, you get a free church building."

Although Fuiten's vision for today's church may seem progressive, he says it isn't. He has patterned his model, ironically, after the medieval European church and calls it "the cathedral church."

"I think our model is more historic than contemporary," he says.

Still, Fuiten's thinking is out-of-the-pew by today's standards and has led to Cedar Park's involvement in nontraditional community outreaches, such as its funeral home, Chapel of the Resurrection.

"The question is not, Should a church house a funeral home?" he says. "The question is, Why have most churches given up on that?"

Congregants in ancient times did funeral work as an act of righteousness, and before the 1900s funeral homes were usually included in a church's overall ministry to its locale.

"The modern church has gotten away from that. We've tried to meet that need," Fuiten explains.

Because cemeteries are virtually nonexistent as a part of new church properties today, Fuiten is sometimes asked why his church would opt to build a cemetery. He says he always answers the question with some historical perspective,

pointing out that throughout almost all of Christian history church properties have included cemeteries.

“[I’ve] wondered why every church would not [have one] today,” he adds. “By building our funeral home and cemetery, we have returned to the ancient patterns of the church.”

Because of Fuiten’s holistic approach to the role of Cedar Park, members of the local community turn to the church for help with everything from their anxiety over repairing a coughing carburetor to their bereavement over burying a loved one.

“Simply put, a cathedral church acts in an inspirational and supervisory capacity over a variety of ministries designed to serve the wider church and community,” Fuiten says.

Defined in that way, ministries can take the shape of selling used clothes or preaching sermons in Sunday-morning services. In January, the church opened Hidden Treasures Thrift Store, which sells donated used clothing and household appliances.

From Cedar Park’s beginning, Bolen, who has attended Cedar Park for 10 years, has supported the involvement with car repairs, but the idea of opening the thrift store took some convincing for him.

“The thrift store looked a little different. I wasn’t sure,” he admits. “But in hindsight, it looks like it’s going to work.”

It certainly meets a need.

As does the church’s counseling ministry, which is currently kept busy through word-of-mouth referrals but is about to launch into advertising to make its services more widely known. It offers an alternative to secular counseling.

“There’s a huge need,” Bolen notes. “There are so many hurting people.”

A Shared Danger

Although Fuiten is a tested believer in the cathedral church model, he admits it isn't perfect. He says the many ministries that define a cathedral church and indicate its success also share a common danger.

"It is possible that instead of actually being diverse, we will just become fragmented," he points out. "If all we are is a long list of unrelated parts, unfocused on the spiritual goals, then we will have missed the opportunity that the cathedral church provides."

As an example of a well-intended, Christian-based project that lost its direction over time, Fuiten notes the YMCA.

"Does it have anything to do with Jesus today?" he questions. "Actually, I think we should be doing YMCAs. I think we should do boys and girls clubs. But you do them out of a mission-base rather than out of a fitness-base."

Under the philosophy of the cathedral church, every department is handled by the same accounting department. That includes the eight branch churches Cedar Park now oversees.

At Cedar Park the money moves within the system. At any time, any part of the structure might show an excess or a deficit. If one component of the church persistently needs money, efforts are made to make that part more self-sufficient.

"Our experience is that a ministry might need support and help for some time but eventually becomes a producer," Fuiten explains.

The church's school, for example, was kept afloat financially for 15 years. Fuiten notes that today it "more than pays its way" in daily operating costs but needs capital support for development of new buildings. A multimillion-dollar building project is under way for the school, which began in 1982 with

eight preschool students.

Fuiten began following his cathedral church philosophy almost by accident. When Cedar Park acquired 19 acres next to the church property a decade ago, he knew offerings would not cover the cost to develop the land.

"We didn't even have the money to buy the land, let alone develop it," he says. "Necessity forced us to set the goal to create self-supporting ministries that would also grow and develop the church."

That need began the funeral chapel. It would be supported by the sales of crypts and niches.

"We accidentally backed into a very ancient pattern of church expansion," Fuiten says. "That is, ministry that supports itself by what it produces. To this day it has influenced how we think about church. At this moment, over two-thirds of our entire ministry supports itself by what it produces."

Fuiten believes a cathedral church has a common spiritual mission under a wide range of ministries. Historically—before the Christian church became fragmented through denominations and independent churches—all ministry in a region was under the spiritual umbrella of a cathedral's bishop. Ministry might take place in many different locations, but it all was connected in a spiritual way.

"Even though the reality is that all God's work in this region is not united in spiritual purpose because of denominational fragmentation, the cathedral church works to return spiritual unity to the church," Fuiten says. "Over time, as more ministries develop through the initiative process, the cathedral church looks more and more like a full picture of the body of Christ. There is diversity of ministry because there are diversities of gifts."

When Fuiten arrived at Cedar Park 23 years ago, he wanted to

build a traditional Assemblies of God church, complete with “all the ministries any strong church should have.”

“At that time, we had no choir or music program. There was no adult choir, no youth choir and no children’s choir. All the children were in one Sunday school class. It was clear that we needed program development,” he says.

That’s where Fuiten focused his efforts.

“Once you get the basics you can move on up,” he says. “Building a church is about doing well at the basics and improving. Men’s groups, women’s groups, youth programs, nurseries, children’s classes and the like are the backbone of the church.”

Over the years Fuiten’s vision grew. Under his direction Cedar Park has supported and started numerous branch churches while providing leadership and financial support for them. His concept of starting and parenting churches has the approval of the Assemblies of God, and the denomination considers it a model that should become a pilot program.

“As leaders, we say, ‘If God is in it, we are for it,’” Fuiten notes. “Leaders have the task to organize the resources and assets in an orderly way and let God’s people go to work.”

Fuiten’s beyond-Sunday vision of the role of a church has expanded his congregation’s own concept of what it means to be a Christian.

“It also makes it fun to come to church,” Bolen adds. “There is always something going on.”

WAY OUTSIDE THE BOX

Ed and Cathi Basler had to scrap the traditional church model to reach youth in Chicago.

It's 8 p.m. on a Saturday in the Chicago suburb of Mount Prospect, where the parking lot of Heart and Soul Café—home to Souled Out Ministries—is packed to overflowing.

More than 400 teenagers and young adults cram into a former restaurant, which currently is a combined living room, coffee bar, Internet café and club, for a night of edgy worship and a raw, unpolished gospel message. Mohawk-sporting punks mix with preppy cheerleaders in a suburban version of the “every nation and tribe” scene described in Revelation 7:9. About 25 percent of the kids who show up here on any Saturday night do not know Christ.

Ten years ago God planted a vision in the founders of Souled Out, Ed and Cathi Basler, for an outside-the-church-box ministry that would touch the lives of youth on an international level. Before 1994, the couple had been working through their church to reach teenagers with the gospel.

They led a weekly Bible study in their home and for months had seen teens coming to faith in Christ. Kids began hanging out at the Basler home every day, hungry for God.

However, the real thrill for the Baslers, whose Christian experience had been formed by the Jesus Movement, was not the increasing number of kids touched by their ministry but the radical changes in the lives of the teens.

During a period of prayer and fasting, God gave the couple a major shift in direction. They were to begin a separate youth church with a heartbeat for missions. Within months, Souled Out Ministries () had launched. Meetings were held in a series of rented warehouse spaces before property was purchased on a busy highway near a mall.

The big event of each week is Souled Out Saturday night, a mix of amped-up worship, powerful preaching, video, dance and more—all crafted for youth, by youth. There is also a family-oriented service on Sunday mornings.

The ministry has spawned numerous small-group Bible studies that meet on weeknights in suburban homes. Discipleship, Souled Out-style, includes everything from bondage-breaking prayer to professional Christian counseling. In September 2003, the ministry also became home to a new Master's Commission program.

Heart and Soul Café has hosted numerous Christian punk, hard-core and alternative concerts. Short-term missions trips have taken teams from Souled Out to dozens of countries.

"Youth ministry is our calling. It's what we are all about," Joe Manahan says of himself and the rest of the Souled Out staff. "We want to equip kids to see their schools as the mission fields that they are."

Equipping means that youth are mentored and in turn mentor others.

"Teens don't need to be babied," Manahan says. "God can use them in amazing ways. It's our job to make sure they're ready to go wherever He sends them. Once kids fall in love with Jesus, they are more willing to put their lives on the line than many adults are."

Christine Johnson, 18, agrees.

"When I had just turned 13, Souled Out opened the doors for me to go to on a missions trip. My time overseas really helped me learn to open up and trust people," she says. "The Lord gave me a newfound hope that there was so much more out there. He gave me a passion for the nations."

Johnson says she now has "a fire to spread the gospel" and that she is certain her generation can start a revival of people wanting to follow Jesus, not only in Chicago but worldwide as well.

"My testimony, like many in my generation, is simply that I

was lost, hurt and confused,” she points out. “Through Souled Out, the Lord saved me.”

Manahan believes that the hundreds of kids who have come to faith in Christ through the ministry over the last 10 years, as well as story after story of transformation and spiritual growth, are only the beginning of what God wants to do at Souled Out.

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