

Brewhouse, Golf and Church? Somehow, It Works

With the overall decline in Sunday church attendance, and the turmoil that surrounds the LGBTQ movement and the United Methodist Church, Bearden UMC in Knoxville is attempting to expand its ministry and think “out of the box” when it comes to attracting new members.

One unorthodox method the church has employed—one that it hopes will draw more men back to church—is to hold men’s meetings at a local brewery, The Albright Grove Brewing Co. The meetings began last year in what Bearden UMC Rev. Bradley Hyde described as “one of those ‘aha’ moments.”

Hyde told that he noticed that the church “doesn’t do a very good job of reaching men. Since Jan. 2022, when the meetings at the brewery were launched, Hyde says the event “has drawn not just men back to church, but also new people he has never seen before.”

“Some people used the pandemic as an opportunity to just leave church, and I think that’s across the board,” Hyde says. “I know it’s very specific here at Bearden UMC for a lot of reasons. ... And so, the act of intentionally getting in front of people and meeting people ... that’s been crucial.

“It’s developing relationships. It’s changing the community’s perception of who we are.”

That “out-of-the-box” ministry drew the attention of National Public Radio a couple of months ago. He told that he was a bit nervous about NPR showing up at one of their meetings. But then, he thought, “something very good could come out of this opportunity.”

It was certainly effective as Hyde says he heard from numerous

friends and acquaintances after the NPR piece aired.

The church also holds regular outings at the local Topgolf establishment to bring in potential members. A place like Topgolf, Hyde says, is where the attendees felt more comfortable inviting friends than to a Sunday service.

“Long gone is the day that just because we sit here, people will come and go to church,” Hyde said.

In 2014, Charisma News reported on a church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who had nearly the same idea. The report said that “more and more churches are meeting in pubs or otherwise sanctioning a glass of suds during fellowships. But East Side Christian Church is taking the concept to a whole new level, opening the door to worship Jesus with hymns and ale in their mouths at the very same time.” reported the church organized “Beer and Hymns Sunday” as it kicks off a discussion about the future of the Christian church around the world.

Another ministry that has kept attendance growing at Bearden UMC is its “blessing box,” where local residents can both donate and receive canned, non-perishable foods and fresh produce.

 The United Methodist Church as a whole continues to face challenges because of the divisiveness over the ongoing debate over homosexuality. There have been mass defections over the past year because of the cultural—and spiritual—issue.

“We gotta go where the people are, and we gotta present what I believe to be the living body of Christ, the church. We gotta present that differently where we go.” {eoa}

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Shawn A. Akers is the online editor at Charisma Media.