

Generosity 'Erupts' at Nebraska Church to Pay Crippling Medical Debt

Pastor Jim Keck readily admits it: He underestimated the generosity of people.

What started out as an \$8,000 idea and a desire to help a few neighbors in need by First-Plymouth Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, ended up raising more than \$500,000 in an effort to help ease the burden of 500 households struggling with medical bills.

When the idea gained national attention, it just took off.

"I had no idea it would go so viral," Keck told the Lincoln Journal Star. "You wouldn't think a pastor would do this [downplay people's willingness to give]."

Contributions flooded in from an estimated 10,000 people, the majority from Lincoln. Many stuffed the collection plate at First-Plymouth, with a congregation of about 4,000 members, but the church also received many donation letters and there was a great response to their online campaign as well.

The Journal Star reported that "every penny of donations to the church over the past year have gone towards the initiative," and what Keck first saw as an extension of the church's practices has "spread far beyond its religious community."

"In my mind, it was a straight-on spiritual thing, you know, Jesus says, 'love your neighbor,'" Keck told the Journal Star. "What erupted was just generosity."

The church's diligent efforts were sparked by sermons Keck came across from Rev. Juan Carlos Huertas, a Puerto Rican-born

minister from Louisiana, in the spring of 2020. Huertas' words inspired Keck to hire him, and soon after Huertas joined the staff at First-Plymouth, he took charge of the church's outreach efforts.

Huertas soon launched justNeighbors, a ministry centered around community connection that helped neighbors with issues like filling gas tanks and providing health care for those who couldn't afford insurance.

In August 2021, Keck and Huertas collaborated on a larger kingdom task: Paying the full medical bills for residents in the "economically diverse central Lincoln community" in which their church serves.

The initiative officially launched in February 2022, and the church anonymously acquired debt profiles through collection agencies. There was no screening process for recipients.

"The debt collector agreed to give us anonymized profiles to keep people's privacy. ... They would say like, 'a single mother with two kids owes \$1,000 is paying \$50 a month and isn't ever going to get on top of it,'" Keck said in his Easter Sermon last Sunday.

"Sometimes love has to be expressed in actions. We have had an initiative all year that is just love on the move. The church decided that there were too many homes right in our neighborhood that were saddled with medical debt. ... The church decided that every dime that went into the collection plate ... would go to forgive the medical debt of homes right here in central Lincoln."

Huertas told the Journal Star that the average donation was between \$25 and \$500, but that they did receive four donations between \$10,000 and \$20,000.

"We actually made a purposeful decision not to get on the phones calling major donors," Huertas says. "We wanted people

to feel a sense of ownership and invitation. If your heart was served by that, then give to the initiative whatever amount you want to give.”

One resident who had their debt paid off by the church chose to donate their last monthly payment to the church.

Another who benefitted from the donors’ generosity is a single person living in a rental unit who owed \$1,000, a single parent receiving little child support who owed \$600 and a food service worker who owed \$1,300.

Many other churches in recent years have worked to raise funds to help their neighbors eliminate extensive medical debts.

 In 2019, as reported by Charisma News, a similar situation happened when Stetson Baptist Church in DeLand, Florida, paid off \$7.2 million in crippling medical debt for 6,500 families.

In 2021, the New Jersey-based megachurch Liquid Church teamed up with the nonprofit RIP Medical Debt to pay off \$13.7 million in medical debt for approximately 3,800 people.

In 2019, The Crossing Church in Columbia, Missouri, raised over \$430,000 to pay off over \$43 million in medical debt.
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