

Outreach Event Hopes to Spark Unity in Milwaukee

Local pastors and leaders are forging new partnerships ahead of Rock the Lakes, Aug. 20-21, praying the event will bring unity and the hope of Christ to a city described as “spiritually bleak” and “segregated” beyond its sparkling lakefront.

When someone mentions Milwaukee, you may think of bratwurst, breweries or baseball.

If you are of a certain generation, you might recall that Milwaukee was the setting for iconic '70s sitcoms, “Happy Days” and “Laverne and Shirley.”

According to a local pastor, the name “Milwaukee” carries yet another connotation, one with implications for the upcoming Rock the Lakes Festival. “I have heard Milwaukee called the graveyard of evangelism,” said Chip Bernhard, pastor of Spring Creek Church in nearby Pewaukee. “For some reason, the evangelical churches here have struggled through the years.”

In a recent interview, Bernhard described the spiritual climate in Milwaukee as dark and bleak. “Our city has a very high crime rate,” he explained. “There is a gang problem—gangs are committing robberies and crime. And we have, I think, one of the highest unwed mother rates in the United States.”

New census data shows Milwaukee is the most segregated city in America, according to FOX News and other media outlets.

Only Jesus Christ can provide hope in the midst of such challenges, which is why Franklin Graham will be sharing the good news at Rock the Lakes, Aug. 20-21. “Milwaukee is a city that’s in great need, and we need to pray,” he said.

“We’re going there to tell people about a God who loves them and cares for them, who sent His Son on a rescue mission from Heaven to save their souls,” said Graham. “He can change any life and any heart that is willing to accept Him by faith. And that’s the message that we’re going to preach.”

Bubbling Beneath the Surface

Rock the Lakes Director B.J. Rogers agrees that change is needed and desired. “One thing that continues to bubble to the surface here in Milwaukee, along with the difficulties, is a real hunger for something to change. We know that something is caused by a ‘Someone.’ People here need to be introduced to Jesus.”

Rogers said that approximately 300 churches across Milwaukee are working together in various degrees, a noteworthy development in a divided city. “Even at the Rock the Lakes launch event in January, where several hundred pastors came together,” said Rogers, “more than one came up to me after and said they couldn’t remember the last time they had been together in a group of so many other fellow pastors of multiple denominations, all thinking and planning and praying.”

“I would certainly echo that,” said Bernhard. “I have pastored here for 24 years, but Rock the Lakes has connected me personally to dozens of clergy and pastors who are now my friends that I never knew existed before. I’ve met six or eight wonderful African-American pastors that I think now would consider me their friend.”

Early Impact

In addition to unifying pastors, Rock the Lakes has sparked an early revival of sorts. Rogers reported that more than 700 people made decisions for Christ through the Christian Life and Witness Class and the FM419 discipleship course. “We are seeing the awareness of and the confirmation of the fact that people are being confronted with the gospel, and committing

their lives to Christ.

"There is a real desire for change, especially among the young people," Rogers added. "I talked to the instructors of FM419 and they told me this group was one of the most engaged, most interested and most hungry they have seen. They were lapping up everything they were taught."

At Bernhard's church, more than 400 people attended the Christian Life and Witness Course, which "lit a fire under them." One lady who attended went out days later to see her massage therapist. "The therapist was asking her spiritual questions and she used the material from her training and led her massage therapist to the Lord," said Bernhard.

Long-Term Focus

Taking a glance at posts on the Rock the Lakes Facebook page, Rogers said he has noticed Christian youth are grasping the fact that this event is not designed for them. "While it is going to be fun and they are looking forward to it, and they are excited that Skillet and Lecrae are going to be there, they are showing a real desire to invite their friends and to make sure that people who don't know Jesus get to that event."

Bernhard prays that Christians of all ages will bring nonbeliever friends. "This is not another church service. We hope that when the invitation is given, lots of people who have not committed their lives to the Lord before would come to grips with the gospel. If we don't have unsaved people there to hear what Franklin has to say, we miss the point."

Rogers is praying that Rock the Lakes would not just be a two-day event, but that following it, "the tribes and tongues and peoples of the church in this area would see this as a true opportunity to continue to work on unity and community."

Rock the Lakes, which will be held at Veterans Park, includes two full days of high-energy music along with messages from Franklin Graham. Rock, hip-hop and popular Christian music

artists performing at the event include Skillet, Lecrae, The Almost, The Afters, Michael W. Smith, Charlie Daniels and Canton Jones. There will also be a KidzFest program Saturday morning for children featuring God Rocks!

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