

Halloween-Based Outreach Draws 15,000

Last night, 15,000 people showed up for Water of Life Community Church's annual Trunk-or-Treat festival in Fontana, California. People dressed in costumes, half a million pieces of candy were given out and children played carnival games. As a church outreach event, it was a home run. But it was more. Pastor Dan Carroll said it was an answer to prayer.

About 20 years ago, the basketball coach-turned-preacher wanted his young charismatic/evangelical congregation to influence their community—the growing Inland Empire of Southern California. He asked God for a way to show their neighbors, many of whom were hurting and needed to know the love of Jesus that the church cared. Bible studies, kids' church and Sunday morning worship were good, but he longed to connect with those he saw in the gym and at Starbucks.

Water of Life's young adult ministry leader at the time, Jeff Keller, suggested a Halloween alternative called Trunk-or-Treat. He had seen it work on a small scale at his previous church in Modesto, California. Church members would fill the trunks of their vehicles with candy, park in the church parking lot and invite everyone to come. Would it work? Carroll didn't know, but he was willing to give it a shot. Three hundred people came. That was 17 years ago. The next year 1,000 neighbors showed up. Then it swelled to 10,000, and this year 15,000—double the size of Water of Life's current weekend worship service attendance of 7,000.

"Trunk or Treat makes us part of the community," Carroll told *Charisma*. "It is a significant way for people to know that we are here if they want healing or to come to church. It is a safety zone."

That is what brought first-timer Tiffani Lewis and her two school-age children to Trunk-or-Treat this year. “We weren’t even going to trick or treat,” she said. “Then a friend asked us to come, and I said sure, because we are not going on the streets, and I would never take my kids to a haunted house.”

Fourteen-year-old Karis was at her third Trunk-or-Treat. “I am here because I love God, and this is a really good gathering, a really good place to spend Halloween,” she said. “Besides, I get more candy than if I had gone door to door!”

Eighty cars were parked on the lower deck of the Water of Life parking garage on Halloween night. Each one was decked out in decorations, with themes varying from a circus theme to superheroes to biblical characters. One trunk host handed out candy dressed as an angel. Another was Barney Rubble.

Guillermo Hernandez Jr. brought his 1963 Chevy and decorated it in Dodger blue—the Los Angeles baseball team was playing in game 6 of the World Series last night, but that didn’t keep Hernandez away. “We have a big impact on the community,” he said. “It is a lot of fun, but we connect too. Last year there were ministry opportunities, and this year I am looking for a chance to pray for someone.”

Deena Kirrish, 18, was handing out candy from her family’s harvest-themed trunk. “I have a passion for Jesus, and I want to give the opportunity to others too,” she said. “We don’t need anything scary. There are so many things out there that can scare kids these days. They need some place they can feel safe. They come here; everyone is smiling and they feel joy.”

The Dingles made it a family affair, taking a week to construct their truck décor—based on the movie *Up*. “This is an opportunity for us to share God’s love and share with the community,” said Lyra Dingle.

In addition to candy, the festival included a giant slide, carnival games, food trucks, a zero gravity ride, face

painting, a live graffiti artist, laser tag and live entertainment.

"As a church, we celebrate that thousands of people who would never give church a chance will be on our campus tonight," Water of Life communications manager Suanna Gutierrez told Charisma.

Gutierrez added that Trunk or Treat is a Halloween alternative. "We definitely don't consider it a Halloween event," she said. "It is a family event. It is a community event. We just celebrate bringing people together."

And it is also an opportunity for ministry. "We have a couple of prayer booths on the property," Gutierrez added. "Our pastoral team and lay leaders are there, ministering to people as they come up or as they feel led. There is also a children's story time with a main character named Hezekiah. There is lots of ministry happening."

Shane Carroll has been to all 17 Water of Life Trunk or Treat events. At first he didn't think anyone would come. Now, he sees it not only as a way to reach out to the community, but also as a practical way Water of Life members can get involved with outreach.

"It is amazing to see how much our people care about the community," said Shane Carroll, who is senior director of the church's NxtGen/Global Outreach Ministries. "We talk about missional living all the time now. Yet it can be tough because we are so busy. This is one chance we have to actually do something significant. And the beauty here is that the community comes to us."

Shane Carroll said there are many stories about people who do not come to a church service, but did come to Trunk or Treat. Once they saw the love, they returned on Sunday.

Now that's an answer to prayer.