

How a New Kind of Evangelism Is Transforming Boston

Christians from the South and other areas have been pouring into Boston for decades, trying to make Christianity popular again in the lowest-churched region of America.

The area is comprised of only 11 percent evangelical Christians, compared to more than 50 percent in the South.

Boston-based Pastor Joe Souza is traveling the country urging Christians to come help turn those dismal numbers around.

“Only 3 percent of the population in the greater Boston area knows Jesus as their personal savior,” the Brazilian-born Souza told CBN News, quoting an even more dire estimate of the numbers.

Wall of Skepticism

But Bostonians don't always trust outsiders who come to plant churches. They question their motives and whether they might be looking down their noses at the natives.

Netcast Church Pastor Matt Chewning got a taste of that distrust when he and his family moved from North Carolina into the Boston suburb of Beverly.

“One of the guys we were trying to rent a home from said to my wife, ‘What does your husband do?’ And she said, ‘We’re coming out here to start a church.’ And he said, ‘Why you coming out here to start a church? You think we’re all heathens?’” he recalled.

Chewning pointed out no one likes to feel they're just a project for a fly-by-night operation that will soon be gone and isn't dedicated long-term to them or their city.

In the past few decades, so few Bostonians attended these churches planted by outsiders that they closed by the hundreds.

“We were having an 87 percent failure rate,” Souza said. His Celebration Church of mostly Brazilian transplants in the suburb of Saugus is one of the few survivors.

Ministry and Donuts

But now a new generation’s coming and turning that around. They bring an attitude to go “all in,” join their new communities and become good neighbors and friends.

They’re not interested in ministering just inside church buildings.

“Ministry happens at a Dunkin’ Donuts or at a Starbucks as you’re able to just be real with people,” Boe Ellis, a major cheerleader for this new generation of ministry, said.

Ellis runs the Boston Church Planting website with Souza, a hi-tech way to reach the lost as well as link up all the new church planters so they can fellowship and support each other.

Facing such a skeptical, unchurched population, Ellis pointed out Christians coming to this area must speak by serving, not preaching. So the new guys volunteer a lot.

“Like as a high school football coach or as a basketball coach,” Ellis said. “Because getting into the neighborhood and getting into the community is the only way you’re going to earn the right to speak Christ into somebody’s life up here.”

Planting Lives, Not Just Churches

A prime example: the Chewnings, who moved up from North Carolina just three years ago. Pastor Matt and his family came deciding not to think of themselves as short-term missionaries.

"Our heart was to be here for the long-run," Beth Chewning told CBN News.

"Matt's approach from the beginning was to say, 'I'm planting my life in Beverly, Massachusetts,'" explained Dan Byrd, one of the men working with Matt at Netcast Church in Beverly.

The Chewnings are concentrating on people, not church-building – including at the triplex where they live.

"Because I don't necessarily look at my relationship with these people as somebody who's trying to minister to them all the time, but rather I'm just a neighbor who loves Jesus," Matt said, "I've probably baptized four or five of my neighbors who live in the same house as I live in."

"This is his home now," Netcast member Tracey Vachowski said of Matt. "And he loves these people and that's important to the people that are here."

This approach helped lead to tremendous results, with some 500 to 700 people regularly attending their Netcast Church.

Members appreciate Matt and Beth's decision to make this their home.

"A lot of people have said to us, 'Well, when are you leaving?' And we say, 'We're not leaving.' And they're shocked by that – that we're here to stay," Beth explained.

"I feel like you have to be fully committed and that you're not just going to start something and then up and leave," church member Marisa Scarino, who lives in nearby Ipswich, said.

Josh Hester, a Beverly resident and member of Netcast's worship team, agreed.

"It's not something where Matt has a homebase or a headquarters that he's going to go back to," Hester said. "And

it's cool because he lives within the community, and he's not here as sort of like, 'I'm delivering something that you need and then I'm taking off.'"

Christ-Like Up Close

Three new neighbors in the Chewnings' triplex have recently started attending Matt and Beth's church without even being invited.

"But we've made ourselves accessible to them and loved them and cared for them and interacted with them in such a way that makes Christianity look appealing," Matt said. "Because I'm not a guy who's moving from a faraway area coming in here to 'save' you."

This kind of all-for-your-community, all-for-your-neighbors effort by the new generation of church planters has completely turned around the dismal 87 percent failure rate of years past.

Part of Pastor Souza's job is recruiting church planters for Boston and monitoring whether they fail or succeed.

"For the past five years, we have a close to 100 percent success rate," he said proudly.

One other component of the new success rate in Boston involves the immigrant population, like Brazilian-born Souza.

"We have a lot of Haitian churches, Hispanic churches, Brazilian churches," he said, while also mentioning large numbers of Korean and Nepalese Christians in the area.

Returning the Favor

Many of these immigrants owe their Christianity to American missionaries, and now they've come to America hoping to return the favor and bring Christ to a city where so many don't know this Jesus.

When America began, greater Boston was a well-churched region, but not now.

“I think we see the remnants of Christendom,” observed Jimmy Coners, a Netcast member residing in nearby Swampscott. “We see that everybody kind of knows about church, but nobody actually knows Jesus. Nobody knows what the Gospel was.”

Matt Chewning said some residents don’t even know what the Bible is.

He recalled how a young man recently approached him at church with a request.

“‘I need one of those books, man. Can I get my hands on one of those books?’” Matt recalled of their conversation. “And I said, ‘Are you talking about the Bible?’ ‘Yeah, man, the Bible, I need a Bible.’”

Ellis said many of these Bostonians may not know the Bible and may be leery of religion, but they ache for the kind of fellowship and community these new churches can offer them.

“They’re curious,” Ellis said. “And praise God that our people are growing churches that are a safe place for them to come and hear about these stories in the Bible that they have never even heard.”

All these church planters agree many thousands more believers who do know the Bible, who do know God, are needed to come and show His light.

As Netcast’s Byrd put it, “More people who passionately love Jesus should come and plant their lives in New England.”