

Pastor Compares Drive-Thru Prayer to Dunkin' Donuts Convenience

Churches have changed over the years, from offering traditional hymnal music to rock bands and contemporary worship. Perhaps one of the most interesting recent changes is drive-thru prayer.

Indeed, churches are beginning to offer a new convenient form of prayer. One to do so is Hope United Methodist Church in Voorhees, New Jersey, outside of Philadelphia.

"People go to Dunkin' Donuts for coffee, not because it's the best coffee, but because it's the most convenient," says Hope's lead pastor, Jeff Bills. "In a similar way, this is a port of entry for somebody to begin to connect with God in an intentional kind of way."

Another church, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, offers drive-thru prayer one day a week in spring, summer and fall. A Florida church even provides coffee with the service every third Saturday of the month. Drive-thru churches are popping up all over the country, from Wichita, Kansas, to Richmond, Virginia, to Aurora, Illinois, and Modesto, California.

Though it sounds nontraditional, blogger Jim Denison says the strategy is working. He was skeptical at first, but he has since warmed to the idea.

"When I first read about this phenomenon, I agreed with a critic who warned that it 'reinforces this idea of prayer being more like a vending machine. We drive up to the window, make our selection, put in our order and get our request fulfilled. That's a self-serving distortion of the Christian experience,' " he writes. "Upon reflection, I realized that

the same can be said of any prayer request, whenever and however we make it. Transactional religion has been with us since the first suppliant made the first sacrifice to his or her deity for the purpose of being blessed as a result.”

The idea first blossomed at Hope United Methodist when a bank adjacent to their property became available. Church members began brainstorming ideas for how to use the property, and someone suggested—perhaps tongue-in-cheek—drive-thru prayer.

The church—whose motto is “God wants to meet people. People want to meet God. Hope is a meeting place”—called the building the Meeting Place. It hosts recovery and support meetings during the week, and it opened the drive-thru for a three-month trial at the end of 2012. It officially opened for Thursday evenings from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. in April.

The church is targeting the one-fifth of the U.S.—and a third of adults under 30—who are religiously unaffiliated with its new venture.

A Pew Research Center study shows that the unaffiliated population has increased from just over 15 percent in 2007 to just under 20 percent in 2012.

“You don’t have to be a member here, it doesn’t cost you anything, and you don’t even have to get out of your car,” Bills says.

So far, Hope’s drive-thru has drawn several cars each Thursday. The prayer-seekers remain anonymous and can either explain a concern to a volunteer and receive prayer on the spot or write down their thoughts and send it through the old bank’s deposit tube.

The volunteers attend a three-hour training focused on listening techniques, appropriate things to pray for and ways to pray no matter a person’s particular faith.

One volunteer, Andy Fritz, knows firsthand how powerful even a brief spiritual connection can be.

“About 10 years ago, I was going through a rough time in my life and there was a cashier at the grocery store. I didn’t know her name but when I was at my lowest, I knew that this stranger would not judge me. She smiled and wished me well and said ‘God bless you,’ ” he says.

Fritz said the stranger’s small gesture encouraged him to have a more positive outlook and he hopes the drive-thru prayer will have a similar impact on others.