

Portland's Trailblazers

Mega-liberal. Proudly progressive. Ultra-secular. All descriptions of the perfect setting for putting the gospel in action—and that's just what the Luis Palau Association and a host of local churches are doing in Portland, Ore.

Churches there have banded together to sow seeds of righteousness in an unchurched mecca. But they aren't doing it by preaching the gospel door-to-door. They're doing it by being servants of all. The service-oriented approach has won the attention and favor of public officials—and opened the door to the gospel.

It's called the Season of Service—an effort that unites area churches around hunger, homelessness, public schools, the medically uninsured and the environment, says Kevin Palau, president of the Luis Palau Association. Heading into its fourth year, the Season of Service runs May 1 to Oct. 31 and ends with a Palau-style evangelistic festival that typically draws as many as 100,000 people.

"Our city leaders understand that they can't meet the needs of the community without the church," says Kevin Palau. "People in Portland and other American cities have a negative stereotype of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Changing that stereotype opens doors to share the good news."

Although the organization got the ball rolling, Palau says it merely raised the flag of Christian values—loving and serving. Yet they've drawn 500 churches to cross denominational lines for the cause. Palau is focusing on the suburb of Beaverton, its ministry headquarters. Twenty churches work together to tackle homelessness among the student population.

"Our new program provides host homes for juniors and seniors, and we raised a \$60,000 fund last year that school counselors can use to meet the needs of these homeless students."

Palau says not only has there been no resistance to the effort, the service is naturally making people hungry for what the servants carry: the love of God. "We've been incredibly careful not to break any rules or cross any lines," he says. "We all clearly understand this isn't the place to preach."

The stories from the Season of Service could fill pages. But it's perhaps the full support of progressive politicians in Portland that speaks to the power of serving. "Historically, progressive Portland and the Christian church were fighting over the abortion, gay rights and other culture wars," says Portland Commissioner Nick Fish. "The Palau family has bridged the divide. The government and the faith community are working together to solve problems, and it's brought a deeper understanding between these two groups."

Andre Jackson, senior manager for Development and School Partnerships for Portland Public Schools, says the district doesn't view its church partners as religious organizations but as community citizens much the same as Nike, Starbucks or Wal-Mart.

The district saved \$1.3 million in 2010 by partnering with churches and corporations on community projects, he says.

"We have a great relationship and partnership with the Palaus and other churches," Jackson says. "Volunteers continue to connect with schools throughout the year to mentor and tutor students outside the classroom."

"The support we've received has caused other communities around the state to desire to partner with churches in a more effective way."

The Season of Service is now catching on in other cities that include Little Rock, Ark., Phoenix and San Diego.

"The church isn't perceived as being the most loving, caring people in the community, but it doesn't take much to begin to

change those stereotypes,” Palau says.

“And what we are seeing in Portland is that over the long haul it’s going to result in many, many people coming to faith in Christ.”