

7 Trendsetting Churches

In an age of Twitter and Facebook, churches too are  breaking new ground in evangelism, humanitarian aid and community development.

1. Expecting Miracles in Las Vegas

Every other week, Scott Linklater, 32, and teams of sidewalk evangelists make their rounds on the notorious Las Vegas Strip, where they distribute gospel tracts that resemble huge \$100 bills. They see the 40 million tourists who visit the Strip annually as their mission field, and in the last year have shared the gospel with more than 120,000 people.

Out of the outreach effort grew the Expectation Church Network—a group of “simple churches,” or house churches, affiliated with the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. “In order to share the gospel, we can’t spend our time and resources on the stuff that other people spend their time and resources on,” Linklater says, referring to the overhead and administrative costs associated with church buildings. “Necessity is the mother of invention.”

Expectation Church currently links eight simple churches, and Linklater hopes that together they will share the gospel with 200,000 people on the Strip this year. In time, he wants to reach more than 1 million Vegas tourists annually. “We can justifiably say we can do that as we build up more and more workers,” he says.

2. Reaching Unchurched Millennials in Minnesota

When Peter Haas and his wife, Carolyn, moved to Minnesota to plant a church, they hoped to launch an arts-focused ministry that attracted the unchurched. Five years later, what they’ve

built is Substance Church, a 2,000-member congregation in St. Paul where 70 percent of the members are part of the Millennial generation, or under age 30, and most were previously unchurched.

A former rave disc jockey, Haas, 34, says he always hoped to build a church for people like himself—"who are very open to God but can't relate to what we perceive to be the organized church." Known for its ultra-contemporary worship, Substance Church meets in three locations, but Haas says the ministry's style is not the real draw. He says research shows that most unchurched people are multiethnic and under age 30, and they feel disenfranchised in churches where the average age of the platform leaders is over 40. "We felt we've got to make sure we're representing people they can relate to on our platform," Haas says.

But a bigger key, Haas believes, is fostering Christian community by helping members find a core group of friends who will support them in their Christian walk. "We've lost that communal element to Christianity," Haas says. "Our whole philosophy hinges on getting every single person in a small-group community in as short a period of time as we can and getting them into ministry. That's the driving force."

3. Redeeming the City in Milwaukee

Holy Redeemer Institutional Church of God in Christ in Milwaukee, burned its mortgage in 1987, a year after it was established. Since then the 5,000-member congregation has been moving aggressively to empower the residents in its city.

Led by Bishop Sedgwick Daniels, the church established a credit union; K-12 school; housing complex for senior citizens; \$15 million youth center that houses a Boys & Girls Club, theater, and social service agency; and a free health clinic. The next project, Bishop's Creek, will include more than 120 three-bedroom townhomes, a hotel, shops, water park,

and a dormitory for children that are displaced. Funded through church giving as well as grants and business partnerships, phases one and two of the \$70 million project will open this year, with the hotel and water park scheduled to open in 2011.

“The vision of the church is to win souls for Christ,” Daniels says, “but ... we have a divine mandate that says we are to be mission-minded. We’re to feed those that are hungry, clothe those that are naked, preach the Word or make it accessible. In order to do that, you must first give a hungry man food, as did Christ ... and they can readily receive the Word. So you provide services, and you provide a holistic environment where that Word can be embraced with love because it’s demonstrated through care.”

4. A ‘Servolution’ in Louisiana

Dino Rizzo has a clear ministry goal: to start a revolution of service in churches worldwide. He’s starting in Louisiana, where he and his wife, DeLynn, are meeting the needs of the poor and hurting through The Healing Place Church in Baton Rouge.

The 7,000-member church has 10 campuses, including two Dream Centers that provide food, clothing and other needs in some of the poorest areas of their city. Church members also regularly mow lawns, help neighbors move and give away water on the local college campus as part of an outreach initiative influenced by pastor Steve Sjogren’s book *Conspiracy of Kindness*. When temperatures dipped below freezing last January, Healing Place gave away dozens of space heaters.

“We were not serving to grow a church,” says Rizzo, who released his book, *Servolution*, last year. “We were serving because of the cause of Christ in our hearts. We felt like that was the best tool to reach people who Jesus died for in our community. As it caught fire and people got a hold of

that, it just began to blossom and take off.”

Rizzo’s vision to see a “servolution” comes closer to reality each year. The ministry has two campuses in Africa, and in March it hosted Servolution 2010, when churches worldwide led 10 days of community outreach in the run-up to Easter.

5. Reaching the World From North Carolina

During a missions trip in the 1980s, pastor Michael Fletcher of Manna Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina, had what effectively amounts to an awakening. “Sometimes when you’re in your own culture, you’re blind to the lostness of people,” he says. “When you go somewhere that’s not your own culture, you see things as they are. ... And I just said, ‘We’ve got to reach people, we’ve got to go.’”

Today he nudges the members of his 5,000-member church to engage people outside the church walls through dozens of outreach efforts Manna Church leads. “We have a global strategy—if there are unsaved people in your home, it goes from the head next to you on the pillow at night right around the globe,” Fletcher says.

That passion to reach the lost also influences Grace Churches International, a ministry network that has grown from 27 congregations when Fletcher took over in 2001 to more than 400 in 69 nations today. “When we talk about ministry partners, it isn’t just send money, it’s hands-on, be involved in what they’re doing,” he says.

The goal is to build the kingdom, not one congregation, Fletcher adds. “Selfishness has hijacked the church in the West,” he says. “That’s a fact. We think about ourselves, meet my needs. That’s not Christianity. Christianity is giving. It’s giving the gospel of Christ to [the world].”

6. Rescuing the Homeless in Atlanta

Like most other U.S. churches, Rescue Atlanta Church led by pastors Mel and Teresa Rolls has services twice a week, on Sundays and at midweek. But that's where the similarities end.

Roughly 70 percent of Rescue Atlanta's members are homeless and another 25 percent are from troubled inner-city neighborhoods. A hot breakfast is served before Sunday services and a warm lunch before midweek Bible study. In addition to a food pantry, the church has laundry and shower facilities, as well as a clothes closet and medical clinic.

"I really believe the success of what we've done in the 21 years we've been doing this is that we get into their lives to where we earn the right to speak into their lives," says Mel Rolls, an Assemblies of God minister. "They see we're their friends. We're not trying to herd them into church. We want them to trust us, then trust the message, then they follow."

Despite the unique makeup of Rescue Atlanta, the Rollses encourage church members to serve others. They support missionaries worldwide and members have been sponsoring children in Haiti since long before the January earthquake. After flooding wreaked havoc in Georgia last September, teams of homeless men from Rescue Atlanta helped families who had lost everything. "The congregation is amazing," Rolls says. "They give. We receive an offering every time we have a service. No one feels like they have to give, but they do give."

7. A Florida Church That Left the Building—Literally

In 2003, pastor Byron Bledsoe was leading a growing Southern Baptist church in Orlando, Florida, that was drawing 1,500 people each week. Its denomination had even recognized the ministry as a top evangelistic congregation.

But instead of being excited by the commendation, Bledsoe was troubled. He knew that only about 10 percent of the people the

church reached each year had been previously unchurched. “If we didn’t exist anymore, nobody in the community would even care,” Bledsoe says.

That nagging discontent led him on a two-year journey that culminated in some radical moves. He phased out the choir for a worship band and transitioned the Sunday school into home-based cell groups. But the biggest change came in 2007, when the church sold its campus and started holding services in a movie theater, losing 1,400 of its 1,500 members in the process.

Now known as C3 Church, the ministry spends “every extra dime” on outreach projects such as feeding needy families and providing backpacks for students. Bledsoe says the strategy, though painful, has yielded some unexpected fruit. Most of the 600 people who attend services each week were previously unchurched. And the congregation has become ethnically diverse, just like the city.

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SEE THEM IN ACTION

See some of these innovative churches in action at [this link](#). Also tell us about churches in your city that are finding creative ways to reach the lost.