

It Takes a Brave Guy to Plant a Church in Utah

Matt Roberts, a young preacher I met last week, has built a congregation of 950 in the middle of Mormon country.

U.S.

News & World Report recently released its list of “Top Careers,” an outline of professions that are expected to be popular in 2011. I was not surprised to find all kinds of medical jobs on the list—from registered nurse to athletic trainer to massage therapist—but I didn’t expect to see “clergy.” *U.S. News*

revealed that the Labor Department expects the number of religious leaders to climb by 13 percent over the next decade.

One

reason that number will grow is that brave men (and some women) are stepping out in faith to plant churches in an increasingly unchurched America. I met one of these courageous souls last week. His name is Matt Roberts; he’s only 32; and he moved to Ogden, Utah, six years ago to start an evangelical church in the heart of Mormon territory.

“We don’t argue with Mormons. Some Christians have been really hateful toward them. One hundred percent of our members have relatives in the LDS church.”

—Matt Roberts

“Whenever

I used to think about Utah I got scared. I said, 'God, please don't call us there,'" Matt told me, laughing at his first reaction to God's plan. But after Matt and his wife, Candice, surrendered to the call, they embraced the challenge. "I said, 'Why should we plant a church anywhere else but Utah?'"—noting that born-again Christians make up only 2 percent of the state's population.

This is not a cushy job—or a high-paying one. Even though his church, The Genesis Project, now has 950 members, Matt gets only \$36,000 a year because most of his members are new converts. Matt and his wife have four young boys.

There has also been a lot of spiritual warfare. "We deal with more demonic manifestations than I've ever seen," says Matt, who went to Southeastern University in Lakeland, Fla., and was a youth pastor with the Assemblies of God in Oregon.

Once, a lady walked into the church and began pulling her hair out while shouting profanities. Another time, a demon-crazed man tackled Matt in the street in the middle of the night after he answered a distress call. Matt's congregation has also been referred to by locals as "the apostate church."

So

far, about 75 percent of Matt's members come from a Mormon background, although many are known as "Jack Mormons"—people who were raised Mormon but no longer attend temple ceremonies. It is not uncommon for Mormons to be disowned by their families if they leave the church.

"Mormon

churches are not retaining their youth," Matt adds. "So there's a whole generation of kids [in Utah] who have been crushed by works-based religion."

Matt's

outreach strategy, however, has not been anti-Mormon by any means. He's quick to acknowledge that young people from Christian churches have also been wounded by religion. So he just preaches Jesus, without attacking Mormon doctrines.

The

Genesis Project bought a building in downtown Ogden and offers concerts, addiction counseling, a homeless outreach and improv comedy shows to share the gospel. The church's 350-seat sanctuary is open for four weekly services—including a popular Friday night meeting that attracts many young people.

"We

don't argue with Mormons," Matt explains. "Some Christians have been really hateful toward them. One hundred percent of our members have

relatives in the
LDS church [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints]. We
believe
differently than they do, but we are here to serve them.”

What impressed me most about Matt (besides his radical
decision to tackle Utah) is his humble approach. Pastors of
900-member churches
in the South or Midwest can make \$100,000 a year, but Matt
invests most of his
church’s budget in outreach. His dream is to scoop up all the
young people in
Ogden who have been hurt by drugs, rejection, promiscuity or
religion and offer
them a countercultural Jesus who cares.

“Church planter” is not exactly the most popular career
in this country, but I’m grateful Matt Roberts was willing to
take the job. I
hope many more people like him will volunteer for this
profession.

J. Lee Grady is the former editor of *Charisma*. You can find
him on Twitter
at leegrady. His newest book is *10 Lies Men Believe* (Charisma
House).

Learn more about Matt Roberts’ church, The Genesis Project, at
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