

How to Reach New People

The pilot program of "How to Reach New People" began in 2011. The Rev. Mark Ogren, conference director of Congregational Excellence, says this program is about "trying to have a culture of an invitational church."

At these workshops, church teams learned how to reconnect with their mission field, how to get more members, why old ways to increase growth were no longer working, why most pastors want to reach new people but aren't successful and what new people look for when selecting a church.

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These issues all sprung from one problem: church vitality. So far, the Virginia Conference, in conjunction with the districts, has coached over 300 churches in the conference.

For the Rev. Laetitia Schoeman, pastor of Fairview-Refuge UMC in Stephens City, this program was necessary to get new ideas to reach people outside of the church's walls. Schoeman attended a December 2016 session with four other members from her church, and the experience was worthwhile especially because costs for the coach were shared by the conference, district and church. Schoeman said she was hoping to learn how to emphasize to her church that old ways of increasing membership would no longer work.

"In the 50s, you could still wait for people to come to church. It was what everyone did on a Sunday," said Schoeman. "After giving the statistics of how few people still go to church in Virginia — which is about 17 percent — most people were shocked and realized we had to give these new ideas a try."



Rev. Laetitia Schoeman visited the Stephens City firehouse to reach out to a new group of people.

Schoeman said she also learned realities of not changing how church is run. "I learned that if we don't do something to change the way we recruit people to come to church, many churches will close their doors in the next 10-15 years."

Following the experience, Schoeman organized a Bible study on Thursday mornings. It was held at a local restaurant. When 25 people showed up, the venue had to change back to the church. Schoeman called it a "wonderful problem to have." From this group, three new small groups have formed. The announcement of the Bible study in the community also attracted new participants.

Schoeman also contacted the local firehouse to see if she could come to their monthly meeting to introduce herself and the church to them. She offered assistance to whatever needs they may have and also to the community. The following Sunday, four people from the firehouse came to the church and are now regular members.

She now opens the Little League season with prayer, and the church reaches out to new people who have moved into the community, providing homemade banana bread and church calendars that provide church service times and programs. She also holds one-on-one meetings in the community at Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts.

The ideas Schoeman has implemented because of the



program have resulted in more people coming to church. “Our tithing is up, and we will be having a new membership service on Labor Day Sunday with the prospect of many new members joining.”

The program has also instilled a new excitement within the congregation to “reach new people” and a new realization of their role not as volunteers but as servants of God.

“They realize that church is not about the building but about going outside and making disciples.”

It has also inspired a new energy within Schoeman’s ministry.

“I know that all is not lost in the UMC and that we can change the declining membership one church at a time.”

The program has also changed how Schoeman and her church view the ideal of traditional church.

“We at Fairview-Refuge UMC are now much more focused on ministry outside of the church. We want to be there for our community,” said Schoeman. “We still do our traditional things but add some things to it so that people from outside will also be included.”

Schoeman said the church maintains regular phone conferences with their coach to stay up to date with their progress. They are currently planning a retreat in the fall to reassess their progress.

“We are still trying to find new places and people to introduce ourselves to. We try to step out of our comfort zones and do things differently.”

Schoeman commented that the experience has not only grown their congregation physically, but more importantly, spiritually.

Reaching new people of Stephens City UMC

+ The Rev. Laetitia Schoeman’s husband, the Rev. Robert Schoeman, pastor of Stephens City UMC, also participated in the program in order to learn new and creative ways to get connected with their local community next to the church.

“I love creating new avenues of doing ministry and mission through my church,” he said. “I have been involved in creating new visions, core values and goals at all my previous appointments but always struggled to get everyone excited and synergized to drive the core values through new goals in ministry in the community and beyond.”

Schoeman emphasized that church growth can only happen when we reach new people in creating new and

creative avenues for vital and transformative ministry and mission.

“Reaching new people starts with a vision, a mission and core values to drive the mission. Most critically it is for the entire church to take ownership of this new initiative in speaking to the needs in our local community.”

The church has formed “Teens Talk” to create a place for young families and their teens to discuss their struggles in school and in life and to be connected to a caring, faith-based community. These conversations are a joint initiative between the community and church where experienced health professionals facilitate the forums.

The church also held a community Blessing of the Animals in a nearby public park last fall to share God’s care for animals to the community.

The church’s evangelism team has also been involved in fixing homes next to the church and assisting its residents with necessary resources. The youth team and adult mission team will be doing the same this summer.

The effect of the program, Schoeman said, has been transformative in new professions of faith, confirmations, baptisms, synergy among churchgoers, their connection in the community and newly-formed relationships with the needy in their community. It’s all about forming one relationship at a time.

“God is doing a new thing in and around our church. My connection outside the church is more intentional. Our sanctuary is the door where people struggle to survive and yearn for love, belonging and grace. The church is coming to understand the meaning of becoming friends with the community and sharing their burdens,” said Schoeman. 🍀



Rev. Laetitia Schoeman and her husband, the Rev. Robert Schoeman, pastor of Stephens City UMC.