

connections

Working Together to Grow the Kingdom

LEADERSHIP NETWORK®

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Extending a Hand to Neighbors in Need

TRANSFORMING A COMMUNITY

FEATURED CHURCH:

Word of Grace

LOCATION:

Mesa, Arizona

ESTABLISHED: 1980

SERVICES: 4 weekly services

AVERAGE ATTENDANCE: 3,500

“Synergy” is one of those corporate buzzwords that often doesn’t have much meaning behind it. But when you hear about what Word of Grace church in Mesa, Arizona, is doing with its local and global outreach efforts, synergy takes on a real and important meaning.

This externally focused church is intentionally uniting its outreach programs to make the biggest impact in the local community. Instead of being “a mile wide and an inch deep,” they are “half a mile wide and several feet deep,” says Karl Mueller, associate minister of outreach.

AN UNDERSERVED POPULATION

Word of Grace is located in downtown Mesa. Although the church membership could be described as “suburban” or “middle- to upper-middle class,” its surrounding neighborhood certainly isn’t. The church has had opportunities to move but feels God has called them to stay in their current neighborhood, which is socio-economically different than most of the church members. “God wants us to be involved in ministry here,” Karl says.

Following God’s call, the church is reaching out to

the neighborhoods surrounding the church in several different, but interconnected ways. First is the church’s year-round Angel Tree program. More than 100 families are served, with more than 300 children benefiting. This program has allowed church members to get to know families in the community.

Church members also have become involved in the families’ lives through the Tutoring at Grace (TAG) program. Each week, nearly 30 volunteers provide after-school tutoring to 45 school children.



Through its “Paseo” program, Word of Grace transports children who otherwise would not have a way to get to Sunday School each week.

But the connections don’t stop there. Through meeting students’ parents through the TAG program, the church realized there was a need for English as a Second Language (ESL) education for parents. The church now holds weekly ESL classes for 20 to 25 adults.

And outreach efforts grew from there, as well. The ESL and Angel Tree parents indicated a desire for their children to attend Sunday School each week, but many didn’t have the resources or transportation to make it happen. So, Word of Grace has created a new program called “Paseo”, which will physically bring

children from the community to the church to participate in the children's ministry on Sundays.

The church purchased a pre-owned bus and decorated it with bright colors. As one can imagine, the bus draws a lot of attention for the Paseo program when it makes its regular route each Sunday, transporting 15-25 kids to church. The children are integrated into the church's regular Sunday School program and are given a bag lunch on the ride home.

'GOD IS CALLING US TO BE A PART OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THIS COMMUNITY.'

Each of these efforts is like a point of light, Karl says. By connecting the dots of light, one can see a real network of services developing. The same families may benefit from several different programs at one time. In this way, the church's efforts are multiplied and the benefits felt more directly.

The community has reacted positively to this non-threatening approach to ministry, Karl says. As the church takes an active, long-term role in the neighborhood, it is seeing more and more people get involved.

"We believe God is calling us to be a part of the transformation of this community," Karl says. "We have four outreach ministries working together to build on our strengths and make the greatest impact in our neighbors' lives."

WHAT LEADERSHIP NETWORK MEANS TO ME

Our participation in the Leadership Network Externally Focused Churches Leadership Community has been a positive experience. Not only have we learned some new approaches to community outreach, but we also have been encouraged to continue the task of seeing our city transformed by the good news of Christ. The interaction with other churches from across the U.S.A. in our Leadership Community has provided us with opportunities to learn from others as well as share some of the things we have learned.



—Karl Mueller, Associate Minister of Outreach, Word of Grace

GLOBAL OUTREACH INSPIRES LOCAL EFFORTS

Karl recently traveled with a group of church leaders to Malawi, a nation not on the radar screens of some of the larger, better-funded African AIDS relief efforts. Although this is a relatively small country of 12.5 million people, it's been hit in a large way by the AIDS epidemic. The life expectancy of a Malawi citizen is only 37 years. Close to 20 percent of the population is infected with HIV. There are 520,000 AIDS orphans in the country.



These staggering numbers have inspired Word of Grace to get involved. Although the trip to Malawi was largely a fact-finding and relationship-building trip, it particularly touched the heart of one church member, Jessie, a registered nurse.

Jessie returned home and felt God calling her to be involved in AIDS ministry on a local level. Jessie has launched a ministry that serves HIV-positive people and their families in Mesa. Two support groups now meet at Word of Grace, one for infected persons and one for their affected families.

The church has also built teams that visit HIV-positive people in hospitals and hospices. And Word of Grace is partnering with two other Christian ministries to help HIV-positive people in the community.

Who would have guessed a trip to Africa would have inspired this Arizona-based nurse to make such an impact in her local community?

The effects of these efforts have been inspiring. So much so, in fact, that Word of Grace is now reaching out to local apartment communities on a monthly basis. They have sponsored events like arts-and-crafts days for children, Easter egg hunts and pool parties to introduce residents to Word of Grace and its programs. These efforts are helping build strong relationships with the children riding the Paseo bus and with the parents taking the ESL classes and enrolling their children in the growing TAG program.

Word of Grace's outreach efforts show true synergy at its most divine. **LN**