

Loving and Serving THOSE WITH AIDS

By Joshua Ellis



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My wife, Sarah, and I came on board New Life Church in Petersburg, Michigan, in 2003 to reach young adults through a ministry we call The Gathering. Most of those who connect in The Gathering community come from Toledo, Ohio, with its three large college and university campuses, about ten miles away.

As a result of a study of Matthew 16:13-19, my leadership team and I asked God, "Where does hell seem strongest? Where do You need your Church to be stronger?"

We learned that Lucas County, of which Toledo is the hub, leads the state in new HIV infections. We felt very strongly in February of 2005 that God was answering our prayers with, "Love and serve those living with HIV/AIDS."

Our first thought was to host an AIDS Walk. Toledo had not had an AIDS Walk in over 10 years. The last one was an embarrassment for lack of participation and led to the disbandment of the committee organizing it. Ambitiously, I requested to meet with the Lucas County Health Department AIDS

Programming Council. At that meeting I stood up and proclaimed Toledo needed an AIDS Walk. I didn't expect the council to stand and applaud, but I was admittedly shocked by the poor response.

A representative from Planned Parenthood, which provides HIV testing, said emphatically, "We don't need a New Life AIDS Walk."

Surprisingly little discussion ensued as the council remembered the embarrassment of the last AIDS Walk. The wind may have been taken out of my sails but I knew we heard, "Love and serve those living with HIV/AIDS."

Thankfully, present at that meeting was the Director of the AIDS Resource Center (ARC) of Ohio's Toledo office, which provides all levels of help to those living with the virus. She gave us an opportunity to serve at one of their fundraisers.

This was a divine connection. Over the next three

years we partnered with ARC and volunteered for everything. We put together Christmas baskets for their neediest clients and volunteered to fulfill community service hours required for the organization to qualify for government grants. Our willingness to serve opened the door for us to visit some of their clients who were too sick or unable to do their own yard work. One time, the lawnmower we were given to cut a family's grass broke down. We had to finish the job or the family would be fined by the city. We literally cut the entire lawn on our hands and knees with only a pair of scissors and two pairs of hedge trimmers. We prayed personally for these clients and showed them Jesus' love.

This "servanthood," which won us great favor, eventually led to great influence. I was invited to sit on the fundraising committee as the volunteer chair. This opened the door for us to connect with socially active fraternities, sororities, and other campus groups. In 2008, ARC spent more money putting on its annual fundraiser than they brought in. Their fundraisers were gala events, ranging from club type parties to masquerades – events attended mostly by the homosexual community. So many people were surprised to find a church group at the events. But there we were, strategically positioned for such a time as this.

In the aftershock of losing money at its largest annual fundraiser, the committee was looking for answers. I spoke from a young pastor's perspective. "We searched for opportunities to love and serve those living with HIV/AIDS. We found none," I stated. "An AIDS Walk is a highly visible, family-friendly event. I know there are those like me who would love to be involved, but see no opportunity to do so. Any church, any organization, any campus group can get a team together to walk."

The reaction was much different this time.

In August of 2009, Toledo had its first AIDS Walk in nearly 15 years. We went to work rallying the Church of Toledo to be on the front lines. A church group provided hot dogs and drinks for each walker. The local Christian radio ran advertisements. This time ARC raised nearly



The Hope Event, a worship and prayer time, follows the AIDS walk.

\$40,000 to continue their case management. It was a huge success! Perhaps most significantly, they allowed us to organize an after-event immediately following the closing ceremonies of the walk on the same stage. At the Hope Event several different pastors and parachurch leaders interjected prayers during a worship concert. We prayed for those living with the virus, for families that have lost loved ones to the virus, that the Church would rise and be present on this issue, and for an end to the virus.

At the 2010 AIDS Walk the only radio station allowed near the main stage (where the ceremonies and the start and finish lines were) was the local Christian radio station. Christian music played for all to hear as they left the starting line of the 5K walk. Again, a church group provided hot dogs and drinks for every walker. My eyes scanned the scene during the following Hope Event. People from our college group could be seen embracing people, praying for some, and befriending others.

This is a story of partnering with God and re-shaping the culture of a city. To my knowledge, there is not an AIDS Walk in the country with a worship and prayer event immediately following! We changed the culture of Toledo by simply asking God, "Where does hell seem strongest and where do You need Your Church to be stronger?"

We have also seen significant walls between the Church and the gay community begin to crumble. When our interaction with them is based on cooperation because we are compassionate about the same issue, rather than confronting them on moral differences, there is a willingness to go beyond the surface and open up. We have heard stories of transgenders' struggles and pains, curious or questioning young people looking for answers, even an ex-priest who left the priesthood because of his sexual identity struggles.

Servant hearts plus an understanding of Jesus' vision for His Church has transformed my understanding of ministry, our college group, and Toledo.

Outreach Idea #1

FREE FUNERALS

Christ's Church of the Valley in Peoria, Arizona, offers free funerals to anyone.

The ministry also collects photos to assemble a remembrance DVD and follows up with the families on the one-month, six-month, and one-year anniversaries of the funeral.