

Knocking on doors of mobile homes leads to dramatic growth at Bethel UMC

By Rheta Murry

A pastor with a vision, armed with research tactics – combined with a congregation’s willingness to do things differently and love the unlovely – led to great growth in a tiny Maryville District church. Thirteen years ago, 30 people attended Bethel United Methodist Church. Closing the church or merging with another congregation seemed imminent. Now, the Seymour-based congregation has 135 members and recently moved into a new, 5,000-square-foot building.

“It took a willingness to part with how it has always been done, and a radical change of attitude,” said the Rev. Tom Robins, who has served the church since 1995. “They were willing to do different things on behalf of long-term church attendance.”

Growth started slowly. In fact, it took three years. The church first tried Vacation Bible School to attract children. They also tried canvassing the middle-class neighborhoods surrounding the church. This did not bring the desired results.

“After three years, we decided we had a problem,” Robins said. “We’re not reaching the community ... we were not reaching the un-churched.”

On the way to church one morning, Robins noticed that several mobile homes stood within five miles of the church. This brought back memories of a survey he conducted as a seminary student. He had asked people living in mobile homes why they didn’t attend the nearby small church. Drawing on this experience, Robins and some of his members knocked on every mobile home door within five miles of Bethel.

“We began to reach the places where no one was inviting people to church,” Robins said. “Because of that, God blessed us.”

Children, most who never attended church before, started filling Bethel pews on Sunday mornings. Though no one in the church had tried this tactic before, church members jumped in and adapted to the challenges at hand. At the time, most of the members were in their 60s and 70s.

“These kids were unruly, undisciplined, and many times they did not bathe,” Robins said. “In order to have these youth come, it took a lot of older people to take them under their wings, to teach them how to be in church.”

Each child was assigned to an adult who would sit with them in church. The mentors taught their charges not to bring food into the sanctuary and how to quietly bow their heads during prayer. Johnnie Hood and Helen DeLozier mentored several youngsters through the years.

Hood, 77, the oldest living Bethel member, recalls working with some of the children.

“A lot of them didn’t know how to act or dress,” she said. “They soon learned and they did better. We tried to teach them right from wrong.”

DeLozier and her sister brought two sets of children to church. She said she taught them to be good to one another, and to listen to the teacher.

“It didn’t take long for them to learn about the church,” she said. “I think the children come first in the church because they will be the leaders one of these days. That’s what we tell them.”

Most of the children, primarily from low-income families, often did without necessities. Robins said parents often sent their children to church without breakfast. Those children misbehaved because they were hungry.

Another girl was reprimanded several times for rolling all over a pew. Though asked to stop, she continued. Upon questioning, she explained that the pew “felt so good.”

Later, Robins learned this girl slept on a linoleum floor at home. The padded pew felt much better than the cold, hard floor.

“We had to understand that the conduct we saw was because of the environment in which they lived,” Robins said.

Parishioners also transported children to church on Sunday mornings. They

decided that any child asking for a ride would be picked up, no matter where they lived. Members also took children on outings. Robins told story after story of his church members spending time with the youngsters. He often tells the story of Helen DeLozier and two little girls she brought to church and supervised on outings. One summer, Robins and other church members took the children to the Smoky Mountains. They picnicked alongside a creek.

“I looked up and Helen DeLozier, at 70 years old, was standing in the middle of the creek, holding the hands of those two little girls,” Robins said.

When trouble arose in his church family, Robins said he used a tactic learned from his father: He conducted family meetings. One meeting in particular cemented his congregation’s resolve to love one another.

An unmarried teenage girl told Robins she was pregnant. She wanted to drop out of church because she thought the congregation would judge her. A day or two before the called meeting, Robins talked to one older woman he knew would be the toughest to convince. Telling the woman about the situation, Robins asked her to pray about her response. At the meeting, Robins told the congregation that he was going to call the mother-to-be, telling her either that she was welcome in the church, or she wasn’t. It was up to the church family.

“The first hand up belonged to this woman,” Robins said. “She said, ‘Preacher, I have been thinking. If I kick her down, God has made it clear that I had better find someone to pick her up.’”

Instead of asking the young woman to leave, church members embraced her and her child. Robins still hears from the young mother’s family.

When church attendance stalled, Robins encouraged his members to do Holston Conference mission work. Adults and youth worked at Buffalo Mountain Camp in Jonesborough, Tenn., and for Project Crossroads of Marion, Va. They built pavilions and painted houses. Those construction skills would later come in handy.

A bi-vocational pastor, Robins works full-time as an attorney for Tennessee Valley Authority. He became passionate about ministering to children during his first years as an attorney, when he defended abused children.

One little girl haunts him still. He had just completed a trial where he defended a five-year-old child who had been abused. After the trial, the little girl bolted from the social worker and jumped into her mother’s arms. The girl asked her mother for forgiveness. The angry mother threw her daughter to the floor and walked away.

“In the midst of her tears, she looked at me and said these words: ‘Mister, does anyone really love me?’” Robins said. “I just looked at her and could not answer.”

That’s when Robins entered Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He wanted to do something to help children. More than 15 years later, Robins still tells the story of the five-year-old abused girl, especially to teens in his church. Most of the Bethel teens attend Resurrection each year. During this event, Robins performs a special ceremony for all of the graduating seniors.

“I make the seniors stand, and I tell that story,” he said. “And I look each senior in the eye and I say, ‘I love you, but more than me, Christ loves you.’ And in turn, everyone in that room has an opportunity to do the same.”

Love, he said, is key to any growth.

“As long as any person in any church has the capacity to love, they have a capacity to grow,” Robins said.

Five months ago, Bethel UMC moved into a new 5,000-square foot building, located one-half mile from the former 2,800-square-foot white clapboard church. The new building reflects the congregation’s willingness to do things differently. Members constructed a metal building.

“We hammered the nails, stuffed the insulation, and did all the things that didn’t require a license,” Robins said. “We had a group of retired men who worked together almost every day except Sunday.”

Holston Conference and Maryville District provided grants for the



Photos by Annette Spence, *The Call*

Bethel’s new building rests on the hill along route 411 in Seymour, Tenn. To the right, unpictured, is a pavilion remodeled from the original barn on the property.

building. The old church recently sold and the entire debt on the new church has been paid off. Though the metal building might seem odd to some, Robins said it suits his congregation just fine.

“For the kind of people we could reach, it is just their kind of church,” he said. “To people who live in metal buildings, i.e. mobile homes, they think it is a beautiful church.”

Epilogue

After 13 years at Bethel United Methodist Church, the Rev. Tom Robins, age 54, will take a leave of absence beginning in July 2008.

“I have decided I need to commit a year of my life to my two children and help them to transition into the world,” Robins said.

Helping to physically build a building while fulfilling roles as attorney, father, husband, and pastor has been demanding, Robins admits. He feels he hasn’t spent as much time with his children, now ages 18 and 21, as he wanted.

“I have two great kids. They have a real heart for people beyond their economics,” Robins said. “They are amazed that Dad is taking time off.”

On April 14, Bishop James Swanson received a letter from Robins. The letter expressed appreciation for grants supporting Bethel’s new property and building:

“Without grants from the Holston Conference and the Maryville District, Bethel simply would not have been able to accomplish the relocation. In my opinion, the relocation not only was essential to the survival of Bethel but will enable Bethel to serve the surrounding community for generations to come.”

The letter further explained that the old church building had recently been sold for the appraised value of \$70,000. At a charge conference, the Bethel congregation had designated 10 percent of the sale – \$7,000 – to be split equally between the conference and district. According to Robins’ letter, the funds are to be used for relocating or new church construction grants.

“We are very thankful for how the United Methodist connection has blessed us,” Robins wrote. “Bethel is a living testimony of how that connection provided a small church tremendous hope for a big future.”

Robins is a recipient of the 2000 Denman Evangelism Award and spouse to the Rev. Ann Robins, pastor at Ebenezer UMC in Knoxville, Tenn.

Rheta Murry is a freelance writer and member of Cokesbury UMC, Knoxville District.



The Rev. Tom Robins asks Hannah to help him tell the story of God’s love for children in one of his last sermons at Bethel UMC.