

Reprinted from the Sept. 2, 2016 issue

'Bridge events' connect churches and neighbors

BY AMY FORBUS
Editor

A safety fair. A back-to-school bash. A cooling station at an outdoor festival.

Each of these events could be sponsored by any group or organization. So what difference does it make when a church is behind the effort?

With planning and prayer, it begins to build a bridge of relationship between the church and its community.

The concept of "bridge events" has gained traction since being highlighted in the 2013 book *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building Relationships*. Each attendee of this spring's Grow By One Summit sponsored by the Arkansas Conference Center for Vitality received a copy of the book, and one of its co-authors, Kay Kotan, served as the keynote speaker.

Those who have read the book or who attended the summit learned that congregations create bridge events as "P-Free Zones": no preaching, no prayers, no pressure, no pocketbooks. Authentic relationships take time, so bridge events seek to lay a foundation for effective faith sharing.

Lay-driven connection

Among those working on Vilonia United Methodist Church's first bridge event, "There was a lot of recognition in terms of the goal here is not to convince people to come to our church," said the Rev. James Kjørlaug. "It is to be in community and to offer the love of Christ in a tangible way."

Members of Vilonia UMC who attended the Grow By One Summit studied *Get Their Name* together. Their recent bridge event, a back-to-school bash, offered free food, school supplies and games to all attendees. They also had prize drawings—for backpacks, gift cards,



A member of Morrilton UMC gives a tune-up to a young neighbor's bicycle as part of a July safety fair the church hosted at a local city park.

PHOTO COURTESY KATIE PEARCE

even an Amazon Kindle Fire. Entries into the drawing meant the church got the names of its neighbors, just as the book's title instructs.

Kjørlaug was newly appointed to Vilonia in July, and one of the first emails he received from the previous pastor, the Rev. Nathan Kilbourne, included an apology that an event was already in the works. But Kjørlaug was thrilled to know Vilonia laity were so energized about their plan for outreach.

"My emailed response was, 'Save the apology; it's not necessary,'" he said.

The Rev. Katie Pearce found a similar situation when she arrived at First UMC Morrilton. The previous pastor, the Rev. Todd-Paul Taulbee, had read *Get Their Name* and shared it with laity in a workshop format. By the time Pearce arrived, the leadership council had spun off into

groups to make plans for connecting with their community. "And it was all lay-driven," Pearce said. "They were all charged with doing whatever event they felt called to do."

One bridge event the Morrilton church held was a safety fair at a local park. Two laity certified as car seat installation inspectors offered a drive-through inspection station for anyone who wanted to be sure their child's car seat was properly installed. And, like the Vilonia church, First UMC Morrilton used a prize drawing as a way of getting contact information and providing special perks for attendees.

"We had three bicycles that we gave away, with helmets, and four car seats," Pearce said. They even laid out a track to teach rules of the road to young cyclists. With the activities, free hot dogs and refreshments, and educational visits from police,

firefighters and EMTs, some children stayed pretty much the entire day.

"It was successful enough that we want to repeat it," Pearce said, noting that next time, they will adjust based on what they learned—such as planning it for fall or spring rather than in the heat of July.

Kaila Parker, a layperson in charge of organizing the safety fair, said they met about 50 people not previously connected with the church, and about half of those provided contact information by entering the various prize drawings. She noted that one family in particular really seemed to appreciate the day's offerings, eating once at the beginning of the fair and again before they left.

"I was so happy that we had decided to serve food when I saw that," she said. "Their oldest son won a bicycle, and they won a car seat for

their family member who they stated really needed it. They were so happy.... It made us all feel good to know that we had done something to help someone face to face."

Afterward, Parker sent thank-you cards to all attendees who provided contact information "to let them know that we are glad they came, that we hope they had a good time and we hope to see them again."

Joining existing events

The Vilonia church coordinated its event to take place during the operating hours of the food pantry across the street and the farmers' market at the other end of the church parking lot. Attendance was so strong that they had the best of problems: They ran short on food.

"It was an interesting scramble [continued]

as we ran out of food and had to rush to go get more,” Kjorlaug said. “The laity reaction to that was so overwhelmingly ecstatic, in the midst of concern about ‘Oh goodness, are we going to have enough?’ and willingness to just say, ‘You know, if we need more, we’re going to go get more.’”

The team in charge of meeting people that day wrote follow-up notes to those whose names and addresses they had gathered. “We did parse them out so that if a person had particular contact with someone, they wrote the note,” Kjorlaug said. He followed up with a pastoral note; both messages extended an invitation to church the following Sunday for a backpack blessing and prayer for teachers and students.

“I was overwhelmed by the laity effort and how actively they worked towards it,” he said. “I came in and pretty much just got to be the cheerleader for something that was organized and well thought out, for an effort that was very prayerfully and thoughtfully done.”

First UMC Magnolia’s administrative council began work on bridge events in February, when they read *Get Their Name* and met with the Rev. Blake Bradford of the Center for Vitality.

“He went through a part of the book with us and helped us get started with ideas and things that we could do,” said lay leader Bonnie Adcox.

One idea was to begin the bridging process at existing community events. Their first effort was in May, at the annual Magnolia Blossom Festival. The church’s back parking lot sits along a convenient path to the festival, so they set up canopies bearing the church logo, tables, fans and water to provide “a place to be cool, to sit down and eat

from the food vendors, and just take a break and give the children and the older people a chance to cool off,” Adcox said.

First UMC Magnolia had more than 400 people visit the cooling station, and got about 350 individuals’ contact information by offering a free drawing for giveaway items, including a quilt made of past Magnolia Blossom Festival t-shirts.

And of course, follow-up was for everyone, not just prize winners.

“We sent out a card and just told them we were glad they stopped by the cooling station,” Adcox said. “And a little information about our church, with our website and our service times.”

They have seen an increase in website traffic, with site visitors looking at upcoming events and reading the newsletter online. And following the book’s and Bradford’s recommendation to continue contacting those neighbors for at least six months, the church invited them to Vacation Bible School. That same list of neighbors also will receive invitations to the church’s fall festival and Christmas events.

First UMC Magnolia continued bridging in August by participating in Blue and Gold Day, a welcome-to-college event held by Southern Arkansas University downtown on the square. Wearing t-shirts made to match their canopies, they handed out ice water and held more giveaway drawings in an effort to connect with young people and be more involved with their community.

“We want to be where people can see who we are and ask questions,” Adcox said.

For resources related to bridge events and more for your local church, visit the Center for Vitality website, <http://vitality.arumc.org>.



Members of Vilonia UMC serve food at their recent back-to-school bash.

PHOTO COURTESY JON NICHOLS



Athletes from Southern Arkansas University stop by the First UMC Magnolia welcome station at Blue and Gold Day, a university-sponsored event held downtown.

PHOTO COURTESY BONNIE ADCOX



The Grow By One Summit was inspired by Next Step Six of the Bishop’s Mission Plan:

More churches will continue to grow every year by at least one new adult profession of faith, at least one more person in worship, at least one additional small group and at least one more ministry that reaches into the mission field.

Learn more about the Bishop’s Mission Plan at www.arumc.org/missionplan.

Contact the Center for Vitality for more information about:

- Coaching and equipping congregations and leaders toward vitality and fruitfulness
- Developing a bridge event of your own to connect to your neighborhood mission field
- Faith sharing and becoming 21st-century missionaries
- Creating a culture of hospitality in your church
- Facilitated “Crossroads Conversations” to assess your congregation’s future
- Leadership Unleashed communities for Lay Leaders

www.vitality.arumc.org | 501-324-8000

Our Trajectory
Creating vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples
equipped to transform lives, communities and the world.

