

CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS: Authentic worship outside

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A
volunteer
teaches
biblical
principles
to a child
by using
a puppet
during a
church
service
held
outdoors
at a San
Antonio
mobile
home
park.
(Photo by
John
Hall)

CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS: Authentic worship outside

By George Henson

Staff Writer

AMARILLO—Sometimes church-starting dreams bog down in the details of where the church can meet and how to pay for that space.

Avoid those issues by starting a church outdoors, advised Lindsay Cofield, creative church consultant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

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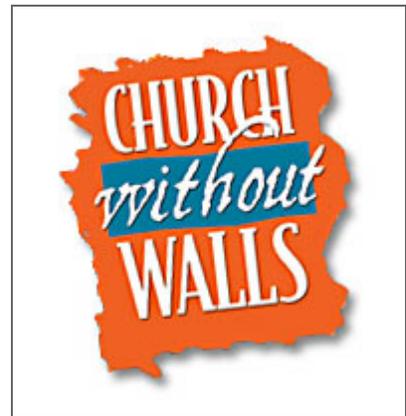
Not having to fund the construction or rental of a building can be positive in several ways, Cofield told participants in a multihousing church start seminar in Amarillo.

“When you take money out of the equation, more churches can do it, and when you take the money out, that gets rid of the fussing about how the money’s spent,” he said.

Another positive aspect of not having a building is that often people will feel more comfortable about approaching the service. If there is no door,

they more readily sidle up to listen. Also without walls to hem them in, some may find it easier to make an approach when an exit can be made just as easily, Cofield said.

One of the most important aspects of starting a church of any kind is identifying where it will meet, he continued. Prayer offers the only effective means of making that determination, he stressed.



“Begin praying about what group God wants you to reach,” Cofield said. “Where do they live, play and hang out ... apartments, mobile homes, RV park, public housing, halfway house? Ask God to guide you to them and believe that he will. Drive around, and pray and try to see through his eyes.”

If the identified location has a manager, start there, he said. Ask for permission to prayer walk the area, informing the manager of plans to start a church that meets in an apartment, at a picnic table or under a tree. Pledge to respect each resident’s privacy and not knock on doors unsolicited. Then, even more importantly, keep all commitments.

Prayer walk the area and meet people, he suggested. Look for the person of peace—someone who can open doors to relationships to others in the vicinity. Pray as you go with those who share needs.

After a core group of only a few people has been established, agree on a

day and time to begin meeting. Cofield pointed out that it need not be Sunday morning. "Any time is OK if you make it God's time in your midst."

Then choose a location. "It might be around a truck, on a mobile home porch, in an apartment, at a park or playground area, or under a public pavilion," he said.

Cofield leads a congregation that meets in a public park each week. A group of middle-aged motorcyclists meets under a carport for worship and Bible study.

While the setting is informal, it is important the congregation function as a church, he said.

"Encourage them to truly make it a little body of Christ that helps and touches people's lives. Seek to be a fully functioning church," Cofield instructed.

That can be done if the people who attend experience:

- Supportive friendships. That comes through sharing with one another, he said. They should take turns sharing what "the world has dumped on them" during the week, and also what God has been doing in their lives. Help lead them to be there for one another.
- Authentic worship. Focus on God's greatness through the use of any combination of music, art, silence, nature or Scripture. "Help them tap into God's greatness," he said.
- Obedience-based discipleship. Apply a Bible verse to life, Cofield said. Dialogue about what each verse says about God, self, others and life. "You lead, but let them talk too," he counseled.
- Life-involvement evangelism. "Include not-yet Christians fully and naturally, and allow them to hear and see how Christ is working in the lives

of those believers present,” he said. “Nurture everyone toward expressing their own journey with God as friendships deepen. Let people be drawn to God by all they experience in the gathering.”

- Servanthood caring. “Seek opportunities to help others like Christ would. Take an offering, and let the group decide on how to use it all in meeting someone’s need. Let them decide how to take an offering, and let them deliver it, if possible,” he said.

- Baptism. Baptize anyone who professes faith in Christ as Lord of their life, Cofield instructed. “Anyone OK’d by the church can baptize as part of gathered worship, and any place is OK.”

“Two key factors will make a huge impact—your passion and your dependability,” he pointed out. “There is no building or elected organization to give stability here.”

It is especially important to have church each week regardless of the weather. Don’t make worshippers try to figure out if you’re going to be there or not, he said.

“When you are faithful to be present, prayed-up and prepared for every weekly gathering, they won’t wonder if church is going to happen that day but will be drawn to its true friendships and God-sized mission,” he said.

On bad-weather days, the church is most likely to draw the notice of people in the area who are not yet a part of the congregation.

This past year, 207 churches of this type with BGCT ties were started across the state, he noted.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.