

Calling Out the Called

A Church Planting Strategy of the Baptist Convention of PA/SJ

Suppose that during the first week of January 2000 some 4,000,000 people in the Pennsylvania South Jersey area vanished? What if Jesus Christ quietly returned without any major incident shortly after Y2K and removed the 4,000,000 Christians? How would the other 11,000,000 people in our convention area respond? Within the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania/South Jersey area, only 4,000,000 people exhibit a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

On any given Sunday across our convention area, 11,000,000 people, three out of four people, do not know Jesus Christ as Savior. Various reasons arise to show why this occurs, but knowing why something happens seldom moves toward changing something.

What can we do? The Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-South Jersey has accepted the urgent task of reaching the 11,000,000 people who live in our convention who do not have a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

How can we succeed at such an overwhelming task? Obviously much more is needed than business as usual by our pastors and church members. One idea that may work is to find some ways of getting the attention of those 11,000,000 people. In order to do this, we must be aware of what gets their attention. Here is one example that may work. Please allow me to describe a large, but specific, group of people in our convention who do not have a personal, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Conemaugh Valley Baptist Association covers Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Clearfield, Fulton, Huntingdon, Indiana, Jefferson, Somerset, and part of Westmoreland counties. In these counties nearly 275,000 people have no life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. Of that number approximately 135,000 people share the rural lifestyle and mindset of the people of the Appalachian Mountains.

These proud, independent people share certain values of life and ways of living. They own a pickup truck, read outdoor magazines, and own their own homes. These people work hard and enjoy life. They like country music and will respond to a country gospel music setting.

The tremendous need to reach these people with a word from God overwhelms the ability of traditional methods of doing church. The problem that arises when we talk about doing church differently is that we continually focus on the church building. Imagine that your church just burned and you cannot rebuild. How will you reach the 135,000 people?

New thinking often turns to some tried and true methods of the past. Many of the churches in our area began through the efforts of circuit riding pastors or missionaries. They went from town to town, village to village, usually once a month and held services. As the towns and villages grew and the churches grew within them, the churches had pastors who began full time service to one particular church.

A look at the map shows that Conemaugh Valley Baptist Association has over 800 hamlets, towns, and villages. On any given Sunday from 300 to 500 people will attend church in those towns. Yet, within three to five miles of many of these towns some 2000 to 5000 people live. That suggests that at least 1500 people who live close to two or three established churches chose not to go to church last Sunday.

My question for us is, “What if we use a mobile chapel in a tractor-trailer rig that travels during the week from town to town, village to village and begin innovative and entertaining methods to get the attention of the 135,000 people who did not attend your church last Sunday?” The task needs a 20th Century Circuit Riding Church Starter. This person would use the mobile chapel to travel across the mountains of Pennsylvania and start simultaneous Bible studies using music and methods that the people of the mountains will appreciate and accept.

Most pastors of our churches do not have the necessary skills to begin this type of ministry. Reality tells us that seminary training does not include how to handle a tractor-trailer rig across the mountains of Pennsylvania. God may be calling someone, some husband and wife, from one of our churches to answer the call to begin this type of ministry. A mobile chapel will reduce the traditional need for rental space, or someone’s home to start a Bible study. Will each of these new Bible studies become churches? That is our hope, but only God knows.

The one certain thing is that the 135,000 people who did not attend church in the Conemaugh Valley Baptist Association last Sunday will not attend church this coming Sunday. Our task is to present Jesus Christ to them in a way that they will hear. The pastors cannot reach 135,000 people alone. The task is overwhelming. A realistic goal will be to reach at least 1% of the 135,000 people in three to five years. Some 1,350 people will discover the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Will you help? Your friends and neighbors deserve the opportunity to hear about Christ in a way that will get their attention. Please respond by contacting your Missions Division of the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-South Jersey at 800 451-6599, or you may write us at 4620 Fritchey Street Harrisburg, PA 17109.