

LOVING NEIGHBORS IN OSHKOSH

// KATIE STUMPPF



Bob Holda's daughter ringing the doorbell of a neighbor in Oshkosh

As a new year, full of possibility, springs into view, many of us find ourselves making goals for the months ahead. The faithful example of the saints at mission work Resurrection Presbyterian Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, may encourage us to make goals focused on loving our neighbors.

Door-to-Door in “Christ’s Neighborhood”

Sometimes the most basic way to start a relationship with neighbors is to knock on their door and introduce yourself. That is what the folks at Resurrection are doing.

Posted on a wall in one of the Sunday school rooms is a large map of the city of Oshkosh. Resurrection is pinpointed, and five blocks in every direction from the church are highlighted. Every Saturday morning, Pastor Bob Holda and a small group of church members (including children, who are great at naturally disarming people!) gather in front of the map to plan their route for door-to-door visits that day, and to pray. It is a densely populated area, and in the span of these blocks there are thousands of souls who need Christ.

Respect and boldness are two things they keep in mind as they walk, Holda said. Because the church is new to the neighborhood, they may feel hesitant about reaching out. But Holda encourages the church that, in fact, “this is Christ’s neighborhood. We don’t need to be ashamed. Yes, we need to be kind and respectful, but we’re submitting to Christ first.”

Their confidence is not in themselves, but in God who providentially put them in this neighborhood to serve it. “This is the turf we’ve been given by God to interact with, and we feel that burden. On Sunday mornings, the homes are full but the pews are not. We want to see that reversed! But in order for that to happen, we have to go where people live and not simply wait for them to come to us,” Holda said.

When the Oshkosh congregation moved into their new meeting space this past July, they discovered that the building

still had ties to the community. “This was originally a Roman Catholic church building, and ten years ago the neighborhood was filled with Roman Catholics who walked to it each Sunday,” Holda said. Sometimes that fact opens the door for conversation on their visits. Holda and the crew will say, “We’re new to the neighborhood—is there anything you can tell us about it? Were you here when this was a Roman Catholic church?”

Other times, their introduction is quite simple: “Hi, my name is ___. I’m a member of a church in the neighborhood, and we’d like you to know that we’re here. If you have any needs we can help you with, we want you to know that we’re happy to serve you,” they say with sincerity.

Elder Eric Johnson met a Vietnam veteran—identified by his hat—on one door-to-door visit. “I thanked him for his service and told him how glad I was that he made it back safely,” Johnson said, who was himself almost called up in the 70s. Johnson then asked the veteran if he had a church that was helping him with his continuing needs to know God and his comfort. The man said he went to a local Methodist church where he was satisfied. “We left it at that,” said Johnson.

Unknown to them, however, the man’s wife was listening inside the house. She had been thinking of finding a more Bible-centered church. She called her sister, who lives about ten miles away, to come with her to Resurrection. The two have been regular attenders ever since. And after they started coming, they invited another neighbor to come, too. “God is graciously building his church through his means,” Johnson concluded.

Home Missions Today

For up-to-date Home Missions news and prayer updates, e-mail HomeMissionsToday@opc.org.
New editions: January 9, 23.

Campus Outreach

Less than half a mile from the church lies the campus of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, a state school with nearly 14,000 students.

Every Thursday afternoon, Holda packs his laptop and hymnal in his bag, throws it over his shoulder, and rides his bike to the campus dining hall where he works on Sunday's bulletin from 3 to 4 p.m. It's an organic approach. Holda just wants people to know he's there. He hopes it leads to conversations and opportunities to share the gospel.

Holda's time on campus also allows him to meet regularly with those students who are members of the Oshkosh congregation. One, Alex Basiliere, a sophomore in the education program, is actively sharing his faith on campus.

Basiliere started attending Resurrection in March 2017. At that point, he hadn't set foot in a church for fifteen years. "I would have said I was Christian, but I didn't actually know what that meant," he said. Basiliere is far from alone in this. He's encountered many people on campus who are nominally Christian, just like he was. And even more widespread among students and professors is moral relativism and hostility toward the gospel.

It's a tough environment and, coupled with that, evangelizing can make Basiliere anxious to the point of feeling light-headed, but he chooses to do it anyway. "It all comes back to loving your neighbor as yourself. I know what it's like to not be in Christ and it's miserable. I don't want anyone living how I used to live," he said.

A Listening Ear

Perhaps you don't feel comfortable knocking on a stranger's door or speaking to students on a university campus. Can you love your neighbor and be a witness in other ways? The obvious answer is "yes!" And, according to Holda, you not only can, but should. The Christian's responsibility as a disciple doesn't get put on hold during the day-to-day activities. "Many of our members are having ongoing interactions with unbelievers or the unchurched as they walk by the way and go about their everyday labors. The Lord gives opportunities in every context," Holda said. "There are a lot of lonely, hurting people in this world."

If you're not sure where to begin, Holda suggests, one of the best ways to love and serve neighbors is just by being a person who is willing to listen and encourage.

Holda recently spent over three hours at a car dealership test-driving cars but, in the end, walked off the lot without a car. "It could have felt like a waste of time," Holda shared. Instead, this extended time in test drives allowed Holda to listen to the sales associate, a man long estranged from the church who had some very real needs. The two have stayed in touch since then, and Holda continues to pray for him.

"Perhaps as you seek to be a listening ear for people, you'll hear a lot of things that clearly aren't true," Holda explained. "Instead of trying to correct every wrong thing, pray: 'Lord,

what's the one thing I can say to this person to encourage them?'" That one thing you tell them might be simple: Be in the Word. Pray. Attend worship. The goal is not to fix the person's worldview; rather, the goal is to lead them to make contact with the Lord through his means of grace.

As we strive to love our neighbors and be more faithful disciples this year, there are many simple insights we can gain from our brothers and sisters in Oshkosh: Pray for your neighbors. Go where they are. Be a ready disciple. Have a listening ear. Seek to encourage. The folks at Resurrection wouldn't call themselves experts; they are learning to do these things just like you and me.

"Be friendly with people so that you may find a listening ear to the things of God," Eric Johnson encouraged. "It is God who develops relationships, and we need to be ready to be used by him."

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Apologetics Conference

What do we say when we get asked the hard questions about our faith? In an effort to edify the church in the areas of evangelism and apologetics, RPC put on a conference this past fall entitled, "In Defense of Christianity: Foundational Principles of Engaging an Unbelieving World" led by the Rev. Dr. Alan Strange. While we ought always to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is within us, Oshkosh elder Gregory Linse reflected, "this conference was a loving, gentle reminder that it's not up to me to defend the truth of the gospel. God's Word will be true whether people believe it or not."