

Case Study

Embrace Catoctin: Ministry to Students and Their Families



HOWARD LEVIN

 Director for Embrace Catoctin, McLean Bible Church
Lansdowne, Virginia

Embrace Catoctin is a ministry of McLean Bible Church (Loudoun Campus) that works in close partnership with Catoctin Elementary School in Leesburg, Virginia. Embrace Catoctin operates within a broader partnership umbrella of Embrace Loudoun, a 501(c)3 faith-based nonprofit designed to equip and network churches and other community stakeholders to build thriving communities.

How did God awaken you to this need or opportunity?

The mission started with our small group studying James chapters 1 and 2, “be doers of the Word, not merely hearers” and “faith without works is dead.” We were convicted that we needed to apply what we were studying in God’s Word. When we assessed the collective passions and callings in the group we discovered our hearts for underserved kids and their families. We researched schools in most need near our church, based upon numbers of families qualifying for free and reduced price school meals. We found Catoctin Elementary, a public school in Leesburg, Virginia, which serves a community that also has a relatively high non-English speaking population and a center for special needs children. Then we literally knocked on their door, listened to needs and said we were available for whatever they needed. This included on site tutoring and classroom help as well as tangible goods and services for the families connected to the school.

What is the scope of need or opportunity?

About 40 percent of the population was on reduced and free school meals and potentially with other unmet physical needs. About a quarter of the families had non-English speaking parents, typically immigrants, and mostly Hispanic, but also other cultures. We learned that over the years, this school has served people from more than 50 nations as represented by flags hung in the cafeteria. These statistics contrast within Loudoun County, a generally affluent community where those within the Federal poverty rate is about 4 percent. However, a high cost of living in the area results in 10 percent having significant needs. So, with exception of a few communities like this one being served at Catoctin, families in need can be quite dispersed and hard to identify.

Loudon County is the area that the church, and this particular area of Leesburg, are located. And you know, what you may discern here is that when we first set out as we were convicted by the Spirit to apply our faith, we didn’t have this idea that we were going to be serving an immigrant community. We had a passion for under-served people and children and as we entered that community and listened to the needs we realized that this is a largely immigrant community and



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

CHURCH-BASED IMMIGRANT MINISTRY COALITION





that God has opened doors for us to serve them. We predominantly meet those needs through several ministries. One example is something that we have on Tuesday nights called Family Resource Nights, where the parents come together for English classes and the children come together for activities including help with homework, media tutoring and also some enrichment activities and fun activities. It is truly a wonderful setting where our families and the families that we are serving come together.

Where is this held?

In the elementary school which has a number of benefits. The school system wanted to make that environment a friendly and safe place for the people of the community.

And did you also have summer camps? Is that also held at the school?

Actually a good example is something we had last summer—which was a partnership between the school, the library, the park system and a nonprofit. What we did is we actually had the children offsite. In Leesburg we have the library and a beautiful park that are closely located. So it's the perfect environment for both learning and fun.

What strategy or methodology did you develop to seize this opportunity?

We found the school to be a great window into understanding the community since educators are keenly aware of the family situations and needs. We learn of these needs through the staff and as we develop relationships and observe for ourselves. Thus, the schools are great resources for identifying the 4 to 10 percent with the greatest needs. A big problem is that non-English speaking parents cannot fully participate in the education process. Also, students who cannot read at grade level by 3rd or 4th grades fall behind and never catch up, setting poor academic and life trajectories. We addressed this problem in several ways:

- 1) As I mentioned already, the evening program called 'Family Resource Nights' where parents take English classes and students receive help with homework, remedial tutoring and enrichment activities such as computer lab, robotics, etc. and of course, fun, games and physical activities.
- 2) Day tutoring in the school—both remedial and enrichment elements.
- 3) Summer camps that focus on reading, sports and physical activities.

4) Making caring connections to serve family needs identified by school officials and ourselves as we get to know the families.

What are the biggest obstacles you have faced and how have you addressed them?

We had to learn to navigate how the church should operate within the boundaries of church-state rules. We made some mistakes that were covered by trust between school officials, and us but our common cause united us to find solutions because both are committed to this important mission. An example was how we developed a process to identify needs and obtain formal releases from parents to allow the school to give us parent contact information to serve their

Our primary idea is that, through relationships, we will be able to know people, serve people better. And you know as we get to know each other, we can't help but share what's important in our lives—that being Christ and our faith.

families—separating school and church jurisdictions. Once parents give the school permission to be contacted and served by the church, the school is no longer bound to regulate what happens in that relationship.

We had to learn the art of 'helping without hurting.' We wanted to help families in crises emerge stronger and more self-sufficient and not merely provide 'hand outs' but a 'hands up' to address the underlying causes of poverty. We found that

relationships were key to success, so we have 'advocates' walk alongside the families to coach them in learning to develop circles of support and tap into resources.

Still, resources are a big challenge. Like many churches, we needed to engage community partners—businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies. We formed a 501(c)3 nonprofit, Embrace Loudoun, which helped us make 'caring connections for changed lives'—providing knowledge, resources, and a network for solutions including physical needs and services. This nonprofit now educates and resources other churches in our area and beyond.

Within our church we didn't have the systems or processes to help anyone beyond our church community. We continue to work these things out as Embrace Loudoun bridges the gap and receives and disperses money and resources and provides a tax deduction receipt for donors.

Recruiting deeply committed missionaries is a challenge. While we have had as many as several hundred involved in resourcing,

40%

About 40% of the population in Leesburg, Virginia was on reduced and free school meals and potentially with other unmet physical needs.



we wait on God to move hearts to add to our team of advocates—those both willing and able to step out in faith into uncertain and often messy ministry where they walk day-to-day with a struggling family or individual. Even though tangible resources come through our network of providers, these advocates are on the front line assessing needs, directing the use of resources and befriending those who often have no one else for emotional help.

Quite frankly we lead with love and we try to meet needs—but then—that opens the doors for relationships. But our primary idea is that, through relationships, we will be able to know people, serve people better. And you know as we get to know each other, we can't help but share what's important in our lives—that being Christ and our faith. And so, those good works lead to good words.



What we hadn't known before is how to be in a school system where even getting names and addresses and phone numbers is just difficult because of confidentiality. We came up with a system collectively where the school identifies families in need. A typical scenario is that I get a call from the principal who says, "Here's crisis in a family and can we sit down together and develop a plan?"

At that point the family member signs a release that it's acceptable so it kind of exonerates the school's responsibility in that relationship. It says, "It's okay for representatives of McLean Bible Church and Embrace Catoclin ministries to interact with me and serve me and my family." And with that, it provides in effect unfettered access so we are able to meet needs, and get to know people outside the school environment. But also as we get to know people through events like the Family Resource Nights—when we can develop these relationships on our own—then you know as long as it's an adult relationship then almost anything is okay that would normally be okay between two consenting adults.

But we are very careful with the school children and play very rigorously to those rules. Now for students who ask a question, we've given our people the guidance that they can answer in spirit and truth but not go beyond the scope of the question.

How have you been recruiting people from churches for this ministry?

The initial recruiting came from the small groups. So here we're starting with a group of ten or twelve people. We went out and you might look at it—though we didn't realize it—that in effect we were piloting

50



We learned that over the years this school has served people from more than 50 nations as represented by flags hung in the cafeteria.

as God opened doors and led us to learning something. We developed relationships that required more of laborers and we put those messages out through channels in the church. We told stories so people got an

idea of how God was working and tried to create what I'll call 'taste and see' kind of opportunities where someone can put their toes in the water and see if this is something that God is calling them to get involved in.

I would say that over time we probably had 300 or 400 people participate in some way. Of course, there is always a core and our core of 30 or 40 are really in significant leadership. I think one of the things we learned is—as you know—many people are generous and many people do certain things. But as you see when you particularly deal with a lot of brokenness and problems in families and things like that, it's really messy and hard. So those are the difficult roles that are probably more so than resources, which is our highest commodity.

We look for people that are willing to step out in faith into an environment that they're just not used to. They are the people for the long haul. Many times, churches and other organizations came to the school and told them that they wanted to help. They would come and effectively be a drive by. What surprised them is the fact that we stuck around and we are now finishing our fourth year. We aren't going to go away. But I think it started with a willingness to go and started with a willingness to just live amongst and "be."

What are the most transferable principles that you have identified?

- 1) You have to be willing to 'go' (John 20:21) and 'live amongst,' incarnationally (John 1:14), just as Jesus did.
- 2) It's all about relationships and leading with a motive of love. This is initially expressed through 'good deeds' but often followed by 'good words' as relationships are developed, thus, linking demonstration and proclamation of the gospel to these communities.
- 3) Listening to needs, faithfully meeting those and sticking around so that we become trusted members of the community. It often takes a year or two before trusted relationships develop with the school personnel and other partners.
- 4) One-on-one relationships are key to giving a 'hands up.' Advocates must be equipped to master the art of 'helping without hurting' and must be adequately resourced.
- 5) Partnering nonprofits provide an essential knowledge base and network to resources. This allows the church to focus on what it does best—nurturing relationships, displaying Christ and carrying the gospel

message.

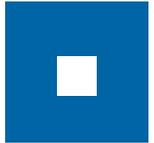
6) Schools provide surgical vetting of needs, assuring good stewardship.

Basically, making a gospel connection and good works. Once we get in to the real problem solving and trying to help the community thrive and families thrive, it takes resources. We found that we needed resources even beyond those that the church had a capacity to give. So we started to

Stepping out into the proximity of needs has cultivated greater compassion. God has provided all we needed when we needed it, increasing our faith in His promises and provisions.

develop a partnership in the community with businesses, other nonprofits, and government agencies and we found a need to develop a nonprofit and that's where this Embrace and Loudoun comes in. That helps us provide a knowledge base—what are the assets of the community and how do we bring them to this group of people. And let the church do what it does best—you know the church is great at relationships, i.e. displaying Christ and carrying the gospel message. I have a close associate partnership through Embrace Loudoun and it is a great collaboration.

One last point I want to make on this transferable concept is that we didn't realize how good the schools were as sources to get the needs of the community. Generally speaking our community is for the most part a very affluent community but there are pockets of the community like this area that are not—and sadly these two people groups don't always intersect. It's hard for a generally affluent community to identify where needs are. But the schools were really good for us in that regard because the teachers, the staff



really know what's going on. So when I get a call from the principal I can take it that there's a real need. This is good stewardship.

What have you learned that will enable you to take a different course of action if you were starting all over again?

We already addressed the challenge of navigating the church-state landscape. Knowing this now, we can help others get started more efficiently. We would tell more stories of life changes to tap into undiscovered passions and callings of new missionaries. We would create a hybrid of formal training and apprenticeship to accelerate the scope and quality of our work.

The challenge in some of the stories is that many of them are deeply personal and include details that are quite confidential. We have to be careful how we share family situations and particular crisis and things like that. Nevertheless, these stories are truly God things—in terms of meeting families that literally had no hope with situations there were pretty significant. Then seeing over the course of time things turning into hope and in some cases people coming to Christ as a result . . . If I think about the compassion many of our brothers and sisters have, it's kind of like our neighbor—a generality—that once we put a face on our neighbor it's a real person and then compassion just develops. We need to do better at that. Many of the practices are best learnt in the field while you are in there.

How can a church learn about immigrant communities around them?

Public school systems publish statistics on the communities they serve. The elementary level uniquely serves smaller, more homogeneous neighborhoods that often align with immigrant populations. The American Community Survey by the Census Bureau is a good resource. Go to community festivals, ethnic markets, etc.

What is your most compelling success story?

We have two types: community level and individual / family level. At the community level, it is our 'Family Resource Nights' mentioned earlier. Here we have seen a seamless fellowship develop between our church people and a largely immigrant

Seeing lives changed and being used as God's ambassadors has brought greater meaning, and a deeper sense of fellowship with those serving and those served.

community. Adults are learning English that is enabling them to get better jobs and contribute in their children's education. Our relationships have helped us know and serve needs. Where adults are seeking answers to spiritual questions, we share biblical truths. Also, we are helping students get an extra measure of academic help that is making a difference.

On the individual level we learned about a single mom in crisis. The costs of medical care for her brain tumor devastated her financially; causing her to lose her home and car and to live in a hotel with her special needs son. To make ends meet, she was working 16-hour days and weekends, having to walk home at midnight. We enlisted a church small group to serve as her advocate.

A long story short, she now has a new home and car. She is working fewer hours and her special needs son is in a better program. The small group had all the types of people in it necessary to help solve a complicated set of problems. The Embrace Loudoun nonprofit was instrumental in networking resources, e.g. finding and helping to pay for an apartment and car. Her life is much better now. This ministry provided a way for lives to intersect that would never have happened otherwise.

How has the Lord used this outreach to change you, your church?

Stepping out into the proximity of needs has cultivated greater compassion. God has provided all we needed when we needed it, increasing our faith in His promises and provisions (Philippians 4:19). Seeing lives changed and being used as God's ambassadors has brought greater meaning, and a deeper sense of fellowship with those serving and those served.

This is the best part of it. I think a key was just the move to putting ourselves in the proximity of a community like this that cultivated compassion and changed our hearts. That was the very key. There was lot of hurdles along the way, lots of resources needed. But to look back and see that whenever we needed something, God provided it somehow—unknown sources and things like that. His promises and provisions are true. Along the way, by serving together and persevering together instead of just studying the Word there was a fellowship that became deeper as we went through this process of learning and helping in this community.

© 2014 Missio Nexus. Interview conducted by Casely Essamuah, Advocate for Church Engagement for Missio Nexus and Global Missions Pastor at Bay Area Community Church in Annapolis, Maryland.

