

Partnering With Community (Not the Other Way Around)

Through PMC, one Pennsylvania church is experiencing a paradigm shift that is leading them into surprising ministry opportunities.

By Aaron White

Forward motion is sometimes a difficult thing.

Churches with longer, more established histories and rich traditions are often particularly susceptible to problems of progress, as those same histories and traditions can become weights that hinder the church's ability to follow the leading of God into unexplored or unusual places.

The congregation of Stumptown Mennonite Church outside of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, has been meeting together since 1781. With hospitality as one of their core values, the church has always lived out a desire to minister to the community. However, Pastor Don Sharp says that they were following an older paradigm – one that needed to change.

"We would do something," he says, chuckling, "and hope the community would come to us."

The desire to change that paradigm is the reason that Stumptown Mennonite Church began the process of Partnership for Missional Church. Now one year into it, the Stumptown fellowship is beginning to make inroads into the local community to find out where specific needs exist and how the church can create strategic partnerships to meet those needs.

As the congregation has been taking these steps into new territory, Pastor Sharp says they've drawn both comfort and inspiration from the words of Jesus in Luke 10:1-12. As His disciples depart for ministry, Jesus specifically instructs them to take nothing along with them – no purse, bag, or sandals.

For Pastor Sharp, those phrases have implications for ministry today. "We shouldn't take our presuppositions along with us. We're to partner with the community, not the other way around."

And partnerships are definitely forming. Stumptown Mennonite Church is joining with eight other area fellowships to form a separate 501c3 ministry to be known as Conestoga Valley Christian Community Services. The goal of this ministry is to work with other organizations like food banks, clothing banks, and affordable housing efforts to help those in need.

"Our dream at CVCCS is to someday find a building where we can be a visible presence in the community for all kinds of spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional needs," explains Pastor Sharp. "A place where people can find out where they can go for help."

He goes on say that the larger effort in all of this is to work together with these other churches not only to meet human needs, but to be a witness for Jesus Christ.

"It's further uniting our church effort. We don't even talk about theology. We're just out there trying to model what Jesus did."