



Courtesy of East Dayton Fellowship

A new dawn for East Dayton

Before the pandemic, community members join in a free meal after Sunday worship.

by Walt Wiltschek

Susan Liller spent a recent Sunday afternoon at the lake—fishing. That might not be noteworthy in itself until you noticed who she had along for the trip: a group of middle schoolers, many from a local homeless shelter. She expects it's the first time they have ever tried to fish.

Until this summer, in fact, when Liller led another regional expedition, most of them had never been to a lake before. On another night they took in a football game. It's all about building relationships, something Liller sees as critical in her ministry on the east side of Dayton, Ohio.

"These kids had a fun time, with lots of smiles," Liller said in a recent report to Southern Ohio/Kentucky District, "(It's) a break from their normal lives, a glimpse into a different part of God's kingdom here on earth."

That's par for the course these days at East Dayton Fellowship, a unique hybrid congregation that focuses on urban ministry, and where Liller now serves as associate pastor. One day might include a program for the youth. Another might feature a neighborhood block party. Each Wednesday evening an outdoor vespers service takes place. And on Sundays, free lunches are available to anyone who wants one. Prior to the pandemic it was a sit-down meal with free groceries to take home, but since the pandemic hit it's been to-go lunch bags.

While the small congregation is thriving now, it took some time to get to that point. East Dayton Church of the Brethren

had been in the community for many years, but it had dwindled to a handful of people attending on Sunday mornings.

"East Dayton Church of the Brethren had a history of being a very vibrant neighborhood church, but not as much in recent times," Liller explained. "They were able to survive only because they had an endowment to maintain the building."

Then about eight years ago a Brethren in Christ congregation in nearby Englewood decided to plant an urban ministry just down the street, led by recent seminary graduate Zach Spidel. East Dayton Church of the Brethren wasn't sure at first what to make of this newcomer springing up two doors down. But the plant, called The Shepherd's Table, began to take root—mostly working with children and youth. It outgrew its space in a small house and asked whether it could use the East Dayton parking lot or garage. The church agreed to use of the outdoor space.

"I felt it was a 'God thing,'" Spidel says of his call to that neighborhood. "I wanted to go to an area underserved by churches. I felt strongly about that, because Jesus went to the least and the lost. We saw God opening doors in this place to build relationships with people."

Over time, the relationship with the East Dayton church warmed as some complementary possibilities became apparent: a church of mostly older adults who could serve as mentors on one hand and a group of city kids who needed an adult presence in their lives on the other. Eventually, East Dayton found itself in need of a pastor, and they invit-

ed Spidel to serve the congregation. He agreed and obtained dual ordination in the Church of the Brethren.

“They saw what he was doing, trying to get the neighborhood involved,” Liller said. “They thought, ‘This is like what used to happen in this church many years ago, and we want that again.’”

Even so, urban ministry is sometimes chaotic, Spidel admits, smashing any multi-year strategic plans and requiring “a combination of patience and flexibility.” He was ready to throw in the towel on a few occasions as hurdles emerged, but friends and colleagues kept encouraging him. And he’s glad he stayed. “If you stand there and refuse to go away and keep your hands and heart open, astonishingly beautiful things can happen,” he says. “If I stay open, God brings these really cool opportunities.”

Meanwhile, Liller found God drawing her to new things, too. Trained as an accountant and later teaching at the university level, she began to feel a nudge toward a different sort of career, one that allowed her to “devote more time to family and church.”

That nudge became stronger when Irvin and Nancy Sollenberger Heishman arrived as pastors at West Charleston Church of the Brethren, Liller’s church north of Dayton. One day, they and Liller went out for lunch together at a local restaurant.

“Irv and I shared that we just wondered if we were hearing correctly a sense of restlessness within her that was leading perhaps to a call to ministry,” Nancy recalls. “She had been serving faithfully in significant ways on the local, district, and denominational levels, and it seemed like a change was in the works for her. Susan at that time seemed to confirm that we were hearing her correctly, and that a sense of call was indeed forming within her.”

That led her to Bethany Theological Seminary, on a “five-year plan” to complete a ministry degree as she was licensed and began working with a calling cohort. When it came time for a field placement, though, she wasn’t sure she was interested in traditional congregational ministry. She had had her fill of church meetings over the years, serving as district treasurer and on the denominational Mission and Ministry Board.

In the meantime, she had begun selling items online, often searching for bargains at a Goodwill outlet in Dayton where she encountered a variety of cultures and languages. That rekindled her love of the city, where she had spent her



Susan Liller

Pat, a regular at East Dayton Fellowship, enjoys a lunch delivered by the church.

early years before her family moved to the suburbs.

“Over the years I had missed that,” Liller said. “Now I felt at home again. I began to feel the city was where I was being called.”

Nancy Sollenberger Heishman had heard about Spidel’s work with East Dayton and connected Liller with him, thinking it might be a good match. Liller made the call, set up a meeting, and the rest is history. They waited a year to start the official field placement since Spidel was just beginning a Ph.D. program, but Liller began attending the congregation, which at the time was doing a more traditional morning service and an evening one geared toward the Shepherd’s Table community while combining some outreach activities. The group included a range of those who were homeless, recovering addicts, the working poor, and a few middle-class members.

“I wanted to hang out with those folks!” Liller says.

Then the placement experience began, and by the time it was winding down in the spring of 2019, the congregation began talking about combining their worship, too. They started that on a trial basis in August, calling the merged group “East Dayton Fellowship,” and by this past March they called Liller as a quarter-time associate pastor, boosting her to half-time after she graduated from Bethany in May. Partners in both denominations are providing support.

And already, she and Spidel are seeing ministry blossom in their little corner of Dayton, even as COVID-19 has altered the landscape: the food ministry, the youth ministry, the weekly vespers, clean-up projects, and all sorts of connections with other community organizations. Most recently, for example, a food truck ministry asked to set up in their parking lot once a week just after another community partner had closed its doors due to the pandemic.

“It keeps changing. Whatever story we tell is what it is at that time,” Liller says. “We don’t have the skills and resources to do all these things, and so many good organizations are already in existence, so we work hard to connect with them and use their resources and create relationships.”

Sometimes in the parking lot, sometimes in worship, and sometimes out on the lake. 

Members of East Dayton Church of the Brethren and The Shepherd’s Table merged their groups in 2019.



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