



Courtesy of Veritas

# The art of authentic ministry

## Lancaster's Veritas congregation builds creative community

by Walt Wiltschek

**T**he word “*veritas*” is Latin for truth or authenticity. And that’s exactly what Veritas in Lancaster, Pa., strives for: full authenticity in following Jesus Christ as a community.

It might look a bit different than your average Church of the Brethren congregation: art gallery showings, coffee-houses, open mic music nights, and occasional mornings doing service projects out on the surrounding streets are all a regular part of ministry. Even worship looks different, with participants—including a significant number of young adults—sitting at round tables and talking about the sermon in the midst of the service.

That all was appealing to Dani Longenecker, who came to Veritas about three years ago and now serves as treasurer and as a member of the “Servants Team”—the church’s leadership team.

“I was drawn to the smaller faith community, the more casual worship service, and the time spent each week discussing the sermon and its application,” says Longenecker, who grew up in the Church of the Brethren but then had

attended a Mennonite church before moving to the city of Lancaster. “We felt like we were a good fit for the Veritas community and vice versa.”

Ryan Braught, Veritas’ church planter and founding pastor, says the vision for it started around 2005, when he was serving as pastor of youth ministries and nurture at another Church of the Brethren congregation. As he explored the shifts occurring in the culture, he thought that Anabaptist theology could “richly speak into the current cultural climate.”

He began experimenting with ideas in that congregational context, and a couple of years later he decided to do an actual church plant. Veritas officially launched in Atlantic Northeast District in September 2009, eventually moving to its present location at “Community Room on King” in downtown Lancaster. It achieved fellowship status in the denomination in 2016 and congregational status in 2019.

Braught says the central focus of Veritas essentially has remained the same since the beginning, with just the verbiage changing over the years: a “confluence of mission, discipleship, and community.” The current iteration of those

values on the church's website says its vision is "to be family, pursuing truth with honest expression, as we follow Jesus into the margins."

As Braught explains it: "We want to be a community that lives like an extended family. We want to be a community that lives in the ways of Jesus. And we want to be a community that lives as missionaries in the places where we live, work, and play."

One way Veritas achieves that last part is through its "Fifth Sunday Day of Service," which, as the name implies, occurs on any month that has five Sundays, about four times a year. On those days the worship group—which averages 30 to 40 people most Sundays—leaves the building and heads out onto the streets, doing service projects with various local community organizations.

"As part of the Church of the Brethren, one of Veritas' core values has always been—in some way, shape, or wording—service," Braught says. "We were looking for an entry ramp into serving together, and we thought the time that the most people gather together is on a Sunday morning. What if we took time on a Sunday morning, and instead of talking about the importance of serving—both individually and corporately—we actually got out of our seats and served together?"

Recent projects (before the COVID-19 pandemic set in) included partnering with a local transitional housing nonprofit, helping another organization use recycled clothing to make "infinity scarves" that are sold to raise funds to fight human trafficking in Thailand, doing prayer walks around the city, and picking up trash at a local park.

"People just show up on that fifth Sunday, decide which service opportunity they would like to participate in, and then get to work," Braught says. "It allows for our conversations to not just be about the head, but allows them to work their way down to our hands and feet, allowing us to be the hands and feet of Jesus. It turns our attention outward into



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our Lancaster community and helps us from becoming too inward-looking and focused. And it provides avenues of service for people to get involved in at other times."

For example, he says, one of Veritas' young adults started serving at Lancaster's Transitional Living Center on a regular basis after helping there on one of the Fifth Sunday outings.


Meanwhile, the art and music programs—typically on Fridays—fill a creative niche and draw a variety of people to Veritas' urban space, which is also rented out to other groups to raise funds for the church. Veritas partners with the city for other special events, as well, such as the ArtWalk weekends that take place each spring and fall.

It's "a unique outreach of the Veritas community to the artistic community in Lancaster," Longenecker says. "We connect through a once-a-month art exhibit as well as a coffee house monthly. Artists are also invited to share their experiences and specifics about their exhibit during a Sunday morning worship time."

Some of the exhibits are designed to raise awareness around particular justice issues. Braught says past shows have examined environmental stewardship and themes related to immigrants and refugees. An artist group within Veritas also puts together two shows a year around specific themes.

As for the round tables in the worship space, Braught says it avoids the "spectatoritis" that can occur when people sit in fixed rows, encouraging people to talk and interact—part of what he calls a goal to have a "participatory culture" and "multi-voiced gatherings." After the sermon—delivered by Braught or others on a "teaching team" that takes turns for several weeks each quarter—everyone talks about how to apply the words of the message.

And members of the Veritas community sometimes share their own stories of seeking to follow Christ and serve others, going back to those values of community, discipleship, and mission. They sometimes call it "in, up, and out."

As it says on Veritas' website: "It is easy to talk about faith and never get around to doing anything. So the continuing call is to 'walk the talk'"—a rather authentic thing to do. 



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