



Lessons learned

FROM A CHURCH RENEWAL STORY

by Susan Liller

I have been privileged to observe and be a part of a unique experience. From July 2017 through the present, I have seen a very small, older, urban Church of the Brethren congregation be renewed by working with a newly formed Brethren in Christ (BIC) congregation made up mostly of people on the fringes of society.

This story was told in “A New Dawn for East Dayton,” in the October 2020 issue of *MESSANGER*. For the recent New and Renew Conference, I was asked to lead a workshop that told what we learned from this experience—what worked and what didn’t work—and how others might gain ideas to renew their own congregations.

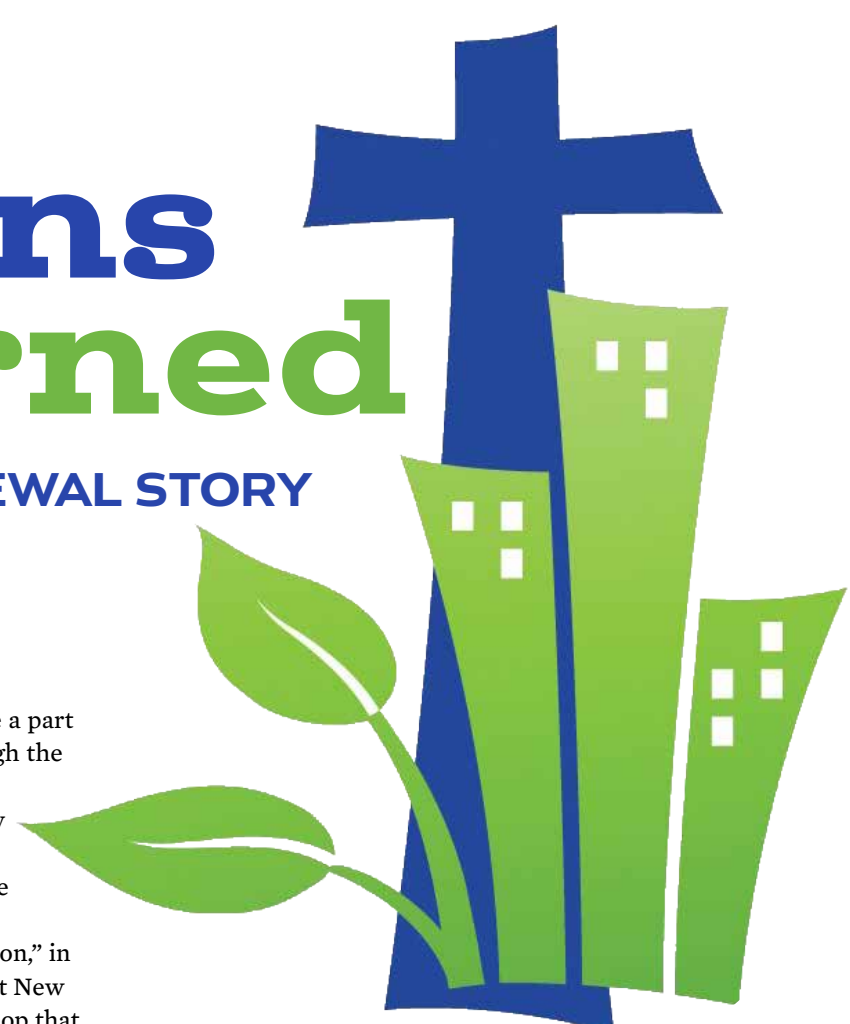
The workshop was not intended to be a new method or theory of church planting or church renewal. It was not intended to dismantle leading models of church planting or church renewal. Instead, it was simply a story in which two city congregations came together to work as one body to further God’s kingdom in East Dayton. I hoped the listeners could glean some ideas to help them in their locations and situations.

The story begins with an older Church of the Brethren congregation consisting of a handful of elderly members. This church’s history dates back to 1845. It had been a large

neighborhood church in the 1930s to 1950s. The current building, its third location, was built in 1949.

The second group in this story is The Shepherd’s Table, a Brethren in Christ church planted by Zach Spidel. Made up of mostly urban neighborhood folks, the congregation began meeting in his home, two houses from East Dayton Church of the Brethren’s building.

Now there’s a new group of the two congregations. It’s called the East Dayton Fellowship. Its ministries are based on the needs of the people in the neighborhood. Relationships were formed with the neighbors and those who began attending worship services and events. Needs were identified and ministries begun. These included wor-



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The Reward of Risk

ship services, youth activities, serving and distributing food, giving away clothes, community outreach events, and mentoring recovering addicts.

All of these ministries are revitalizing the original Brethren congregation and its remaining members. When the East Dayton church lost its pastor in 2016 and was considering asking Spidel to be their pastor, the members told each other, “We used to be a neighborhood church. We want that back.”

What helped us succeed? The No. 1 requirement was patience. An idea would be presented to the two separate groups. There was discussion. Then the topic was tabled till the next meeting. This discussion and waiting process took several rounds. Then pros and cons were identified. Eventually a decision was made by each group. If everyone agreed, the idea was put into place.


This process took place many times. For some decisions, a joint group was formed for the discussion process, which allowed people to slowly adapt to change and discern together.

Another factor contributing to the success of this story is that the groups started with the easier stuff. Joint community outreach events were the first activities consid-

ered. The last activity to be combined was the Sunday worship service. About three years spanned the first and the last, illustrating the time needed for these two groups to bond together.

What did not work? The main factor was that the planning process offered by church planting and renewal coaches was not right for this story and this set of circumstances. The traditional recommendation of creating a five-year plan and sticking to it didn’t work. The people living in this economically depressed, unstable neighborhood have chaotic lives, and relationships explode easily. The environment changes quickly and often. A fixed plan may work in more stable environments, but not here.

How did we adjust? When the plan did not work, other tactics did: being willing to change directions, learning and becoming part of the neighborhood, and building relationships.

The biggest lesson comes from the words of pastor Zach Spidel: “The good things that happened were not in the plan. They happened when we loved people relationally.” 

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