



The Church in the Center: Inside Out Ministry

By Yvonne Estrada

The Church in the Center, a congregation committed to serving the community, began with a personal journey. Founding pastor Ben Hays and his family first experienced The Medical Center (TMC) while seeking answers for their son's rare liver disease. During this difficult time at the Texas Children's Hospital, Ben and his wife saw that the location where God had placed them was "an epicenter of hope, love, and genuine compassion."

They also saw that day and night, 365 days out of the year, this area of the city is in constant movement. They realized that the people who make up this community are diverse, not only in age, race, career, and culture but also in the knowledge of who Jesus Christ is.

God gave Ben Hays a vision to create a church "intentionally organized around the dynamics of [this] Medical Center" - a church that seeks out people and presents the Gospel in an "accessible, convenient, and appealing" way.

"The city is largely unreached," says Hays, a fact supported by research. And, according to the *Houston Profile Project* done by Mission Houston, the TMC area ranks last in people who know Christ. Hays responded to God's call to Houston to fulfill a big plan for this specific population group in Houston.

From a vision to a reality, God equipped Hays to plant and now lead The Church in the Center. Through weekly small groups, called Community Groups, church members dive into the Word and "share life together." These groups are the core of the church because nothing is possible without being "grounded in truth."

Since October of this year, The Church in the Center has made it a priority to penetrate the Medical Center and put into practice an "inside out ministry" philosophy. Hays planted this church to be one that is "more about people and less about buildings and programs." A church with members committed to investing in the needs of this community.

The church had an immediate opportunity to demonstrate this value when Hurricane Ike delayed the launch of the first public worship. Instead of worrying about the inability to convene for worship services, Hays led his congregation from the "inside out" to minister to the community by volunteering at the Houston Food Bank.



In order to fulfill the needs of this community, The Church in the Center has continued to be creative in establishing powerful and effective outreach projects. Among these, is The Lunch Break Fellowship where, every Tuesday, free lunch is served while Hays presents a devotional. Simply said, "Lunch is a good time to connect with people."

In relating with the healthcare professionals, students, and workers, Pastor Ben is realizing more and more that many do not have a church home or have not heard about the Bible. Churches cannot wait for people to go to them, "we need churches seeking out people" and showing them the love of Jesus Christ.

Another innovative outreach project, planned for the upcoming year, is Shift Change Fellowship. The Church in the Center will work to engage with the "massive exchange of people" that occurs during a hospital shift change.

The mission of The Church in the Center is to approach, befriend, and serve the multiethnic and multicultural community that makes up the TMC of Houston. Through volunteering opportunities, outreach programs, weekly bible studies, and Sunday service, The Church in the Center is making "the body of Christ accessible" to this population. Hays' prayer is that this church be a living example of the church formed on The Day of Pentecost, where "men from every country under heaven" (Acts 2:5) worshiped together.

The Church in the Center is making its mark in Houston as Pastor Ben Hays continues to "follow the Lord's lead [to transform the TMC] one step at a time."

More information about The Church in the Center can be found at <http://www.churchinthecenter.com> or by contacting Pastor Ben Hays at ben@thecitc.com.