



Learn to  
**Partner**

How one church, working with community groups, is making a big difference in a small town.

by Chuck Warnock

Six months into my new pastorate, I was stumped. In June 2004, my wife and I had moved to Chatham, Virginia, for me to become the eighteenth pastor of the historic Chatham Baptist Church. The search process had taken three years, and the church had almost given up on finding an experienced pastor to lead them in a new direction. One search committee member sighed, "When we told prospective pastors we were a small church in a small town they quickly lost interest in talking with us."

But Debbie and I felt called to Chatham, and I thought, "I've led every church I have pastored to grow, this should be easy." But six months later, I sat stumped.

Small town life is different. It wasn't that we disliked living in Chatham, with its Norman Rockwell charm, tree-lined streets, grand old houses, and historic buildings. We did like it.

To top it off, we were living in the house of our dreams, an old 1897 Victorian situated on Chatham's bustling Main Street. Folks befriended us both in the church and community. We eased comfortably into the rhythm of small town life. If we had moved to Chatham to retire, everything would have been great.

But we weren't retiring. I was called to lead a declining congregation to the next chapter in its historic legacy. The only problem: I couldn't figure out what to do.

## What doesn't work here

I had led churches to remodel buildings, buy property, launch direct mail campaigns, and dream new dreams. I knew how to lead suburban churches, but there was something different about Chatham, and I couldn't figure it out.

Of course, I had never actually lived in a small town before so it was a new experience for me. For starters, there was no Starbucks and the closest mall was 20 miles away. The movie theater closed years ago, and there wasn't much to do. I remember saying as Debbie and I drove through a small town several years ago, "If I ever had to live in a place like this, I'd go nuts." Well, I wasn't going nuts, but I was restless. On long afternoons alone in the church office I found myself googling *senior pastor position*, *pastor search committee* and other equally desperate phrases.

Not only was the town small, the church was the smallest I had pastored since graduating from seminary 24 years earlier. In previous churches I had preached to 300-400 each Sunday. Although this church was founded in 1857 and had a distinguished history, most Sundays about a hundred showed up for worship.

The church and town weren't my only concerns. The entire region was undergoing a radical economic transformation. For more than 100 years, the economy had depended

on tobacco-growing, textile-manufacturing, and furniture-building. All of that was gone. While I privately applauded healthier attitudes toward tobacco, I sympathized with the family farmers who were losing their livelihood.

Textile production in Virginia had moved to China, India, and Mexico. At its height Dan River Mills, the largest textile company in our area, had employed over 19,000 factory workers. By 2004, Dan River had less than a thousand employees on its payroll.

The furniture industry was no different. Local companies were importing the majority of their product line. Our region suffered with the highest unemployment in the state of Virginia. But the community had taken steps to reverse this decline and reinvent itself.

Church members told me about a unique partnership between Virginia Tech University, the city of Danville, and Pittsylvania County where Chatham is the county seat.

These three groups had joined forces to reshape the local economy. People told me it was difficult at first, but finally they did come together, and the result was amazing.

The crown jewel of this collaboration was The Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, a \$20 million glass-and-brick research center dedicated to new technologies and new jobs for the people of Southside Virginia.

In less than four years, The Institute was making progress. New jobs were announced almost every month as companies made plans to relocate to our area. These were high tech jobs, not the low-wage, low-skill jobs of the past.

This model of collaboration brought hope to our community and hope to me for our church. *If our church could figure out how to pull people together like this region has done, we could accomplish a lot*, I thought. Maybe our church's contribution didn't have to be something we did all by ourselves.

## A glimpse of the future

Fast forward to 2007. Things have changed dramatically. Even though we are still a small church in a small town, in a little over two years we have:

- Partnered with the Boys and Girls Club to establish a club at our church, which now has over 150 kids enrolled, serving about 40 boys and girls per day.
- Partnered with other pastors to build a new community center. With a \$3 million grant we received, we will soon complete a new 16,000-square-foot building that will house a gym, meeting rooms, art studios, a computer lab, and a commercial kitchen.
- Partnered with local artists and educators to begin a series of open-mic nights for teens that meets in an empty storefront owned by a church member. More than 80 high schoolers show up to display their art, sing, present dramatic skits, read poetry they have written, and support the performers.



- Partnered with teens and parents to form a summer drama club. The high school drama club had been disbanded because no faculty sponsors were available. Our church hosted the drama group's week-long workshop led by a local theater grad student. On the last Friday night in July, the students presented three one-act plays in our fellowship hall. Over 50 of our neighbors attended, mostly people who do not attend our church.

- Partnered with Virginia Tech University and local arts enthusiasts to form a community arts organization. Over 30 children take weekly music lessons in violin, cello, guitar, piano, and voice. The goal is to form a community youth orchestra. Our church has become the unofficial headquarters of this program hosting concerts and providing space for lessons. One concert-goer said to me, "I didn't know Chatham had anything like this."

How did all this happen in a small church in a small town? In my desperate search for something that would work in Chatham, I read Darrell Grader's book, *Missional Church*. Some words describing a missional approach to evangelism seemed to jump off the page: "Evangelism would move from an act of recruiting or co-opting those outside the church to an invitation to companionship." That was exactly what we needed to do in Chatham, invite the community to join us as companions, partners in doing good in our community.

It was a new perspective for me. But I knew the methods I had used in other churches would not work here. Both the church and I would have to think differently.

## Building without a blueprint

Not long after moving to Chatham, I noticed there was nothing for kids to do after school—no YMCA, no community center, and no church gym. *If we had a gym*, I thought, *we could offer activities for kids, seniors, and families*. But a recreation building was expensive, and who would staff it?

At lunch with our deacon chairman, I suggested that our church do something to provide after-school programs for kids. But I added, "I know our resources are limited. It would take money and staff to build that kind of program."

Our chairman, Ben Davenport, said, "I like to partner with other people to get things done. I work with a guy who is on the board of the Boys and Girls Club in Danville. Would you like to meet him and find out what they're doing?"

Two weeks later we met with the Danville leaders. The Boys and Girls Club would provide programming and staff, but money was an issue. We estimated the Chatham club would need about \$50,000 per year, plus a place to meet. No one knew where that money would come from, but we all agreed to continue exploring the possibilities.

I asked if our church could offer programs to Boys and Girls Club members each week. I was told we couldn't make kids participate, but we could promote church events and programs for kids within the club. *A way*



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*to build bridges to kids and their families*, I thought.

About a year passed without much progress. The Boys and Girls Club board looked at every possible site with a gym, including abandoned schools and the National Guard Armory. None of the sites was available. We were all a bit discouraged.

Then one October morning I got a phone call from Ben: "If the Club can open in Chatham by the first of December, they can get a grant of \$40,000 to fund the first year. Could they meet at our church?"

Ten years ago our church had built a new fellowship hall. Our old fellowship hall stored Ping-pong tables and a couple of foosball games. It wasn't a perfect space and we didn't have a gym, but it was good enough to start. We agreed to present this to the church quickly.

Two weeks later our congregation voted almost unanimously, and the Boys and Girls Club of Chatham officially opened in our basement. Today, over 150 kids are enrolled, attendance averages about 40 per day, and we are reaching out to children and families we would never have encountered otherwise. Ten of these kids participated in VBS this year, others have come to youth events, and one family has visited us on Sunday morning.

Both our church and community were pleased to have a Boys and Girls Club in Chatham, but we still had the dream of a new community center to accommodate our growing after-school programs. The regional hospital had just been sold to a for-profit hospital company. The sale generated a \$200 million windfall for the area. The hospital board had earmarked \$16 million for new community projects, and announced a series of public forums where citizens could apply for grants to fund community projects.

We hosted a lunch for area pastors to discuss the possibility of a community center. Our pastors' group wrote a grant proposal and sent it to the hospital board. Hopes were high, but months dragged on without any word. Then we received a letter: "The Board has identified the Chatham Community Center as a potential capital project."

Our proposal had been one of about thirty the board considered. Later I was told the hospital board funded our community center for two reasons: broad community support, and the success of our new Boys and Girls Club. In our church fellowship hall, the president of The Danville Regional Foundation presented us with \$3 million check to build a community center. Partnering pays off—sometimes literally!

## Talk, look, listen

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, is famous for his quote, "The world is my parish." We weren't quite that ambitious, but we made the intentional decision to engage our community. We didn't know it then, but we were taking the first step toward becoming a missional congregation, focused not on ourselves but on the mission God has called us to.

I wish I could tell you we did all this in a systematic way, but we didn't. We didn't convene a task force, form a committee, or do months of strategic planning. The church had done all that before, compiling reams of reports, but nothing had changed.

This time we were after results, not reports. And we got them!

Second, our church members realized we couldn't do it by ourselves. Our manpower and resources were limited. If we were going to engage our community and have the kind of impact we desired, we needed help. Our church members were already stretched with traditional programs like Sunday school, choirs, and committees. We realized the work of engaging the community had to include the community.

Third, we started conversations with our neighbors and listened to what they said. We discovered many shared the same interests we did, providing programs for teens, encouraging the arts, serving the underserved, and bringing the community together in celebration and friendship.

These conversations didn't take place in a programmed setting. Instead several of us just started talking to people outside our church about our community. Over countless cups of coffee, we discovered capable people with great ideas. For example, a local artist suggested we use art to address teen issues. This conversation became the foundation for Sound-check, the teen open-mic nights, which our church members supported by providing the space, refreshments, and volunteers.

Another conversation with parents of elementary children revealed the need for quality music instruction in our community. The closest Suzuki violin instructor was 20 miles away in Danville.

One of our members with ties to Virginia Tech, Betty Davenport, brought up the need in a conversation with the university's vice president. That conversation led to our partnership with Virginia Tech and The Renaissance Music Academy of Blacksburg to provide quality music instruction for kids in our area. Other conversations led to community projects for which our church offered space, volunteers, funding, or other kinds of support.

As people outside our church realized we were really interested in the community, they opened up to us, and viewed us in a different light. An elementary school teacher has visited our church several times. She is involved in the music program and told me recently, "You know, attending your church isn't as bad as I thought it would be."

We laughed at her comment, but both of us understood what she meant: folks were seeing our church with new eyes. We were building bridges.

Fourth, we learned that when you partner with others, you give up some control. You collaborate. We collaborated with teachers, local politicians, business leaders, and artists as equal partners.

A media representative said to me one day, "It's good to see a church involved with real life."

An African-American pastor expressed it this way: "Before," she said, "there were *its* things and *them* things. This is the first time we have worked together on *our* thing."

Finally, we had to drop our hidden agendas. We weren't doing good in our community only to get people to join our church. True, our worship attendance is up about 20 percent. New members have joined, and we have first-time visitors almost every Sunday. Not all are a result of our partnerships, but some come because they have seen what we are doing.

More important, we are becoming known as a church

that cares about the community. We don't label these partnerships as evangelism or even pre-evangelism. We are just building bridges, working with others, and making a difference in our community.

## How partnering helps me pastor

The past two years have been exciting for me as a pastor. I no longer google church job openings. I'm happy where I am, even though I've never been in this situation before. What changed? Everything: my perspective, the skills I valued, and the goals I pursued.

I found I no longer have to be the man with the plan. In my previous pastorates, I was the expert. I was the expert in analyzing my community, charting its demographic profile, and designing strategies to reach the people around us. In Chatham, my expertise failed both me and the church.

Through our partnerships, I learned that small town ministry happens in everyday life. Now, my role is simply to meet people, see what God is doing in their lives, and see how we might work together to better our community. I've learned to share the limelight; shared success is sweeter than solitary success. In sum, some very simple,

small town joys have replaced my old methods and measures of success. I like knowing my neighbors, not as prospective church members, but because they are my neighbors. I like the shouts of kids at after-school programs in our church basement, and the squeaks and squawks of young violinists practicing down the hall. I like the racket of construction on the new community center in the center of town.

Most of all I like seeing the smiles on the faces of my neighbors and friends when we talk about what we've done together in these past two years. Like our region, our town is changing for the better, and in the process, a small church is making a big impact.

