

How one church is building relationships throughout the community to attract non-Christians to Christ

# Getting in the Stream

By Nancy Karpenske

**W**e own a lot of dirt. We envision a variety of buildings on our future campus. But we definitely are *not* operating with the mentality, “If we build it, they will come.”

LifeBridge Christian Church, Longmont, Colorado, is expanding, not just with buildings, but also with ministry in the community. Senior minister Rick Rusaw encourages and challenges members to invest themselves “across the street.” As our name indicates, we desire to build bridges into our community. We want our people to head back into the groups and organizations they came from, to be an influence, to build a connection. We intend our buildings to see more than “weekend only” usage. We are purposely creating opportunities for community groups to use our facilities. That’s why we are collaborating with a community college for adult classroom space and with a local recreation center for sports and activity space.

LifeBridge is committed to using her resources, both people and buildings, to make a difference in our community. We accomplish this on three levels. (1) We make our building available whenever possible for groups to have meetings or programs. (2) We send teams of volunteers to help community organizations with their projects. (3) We encourage individuals to plug in and to get involved. We hope they rub shoulders, make friends, and make a difference. We paint a picture of Christians getting in the stream of life, instead of the church standing on



Rick Rusaw (left) and Jack Hay met when LifeBridge Christian Church hosted meetings to help solve underage drinking in the community. Hay has since become a member of the church and volunteer leader of the Community Outreach ministry.

the shore and calling out, “We’ve got something you can use.”

## One Man’s Story

Jack Hay is the volunteer leader of the Community Outreach ministry at LifeBridge. He is enthusiastic about connecting LifeBridge volunteers with nonprofit helping agencies. He collects information by asking, “How can we help you accomplish your goals and projects?” We want to come alongside to meet needs. In the process we build relationships. Hay says, “It really is a no-strings-attached approach. But people who are comfortable and growing in their Christian faith have an unmistakable attractiveness. We simply try to help meet needs and trust that God will take care of the next step.”

Hay speaks from experience. Two years ago he was a school district official who had no church connec-

tions. Although he had attended a church a few times as a kid, he had lived most of his adult life not knowing God or needing a church. Then he sat across the table from a down-to-earth, hope-filled, yet practical Christian.

The school district had formed a task force to brainstorm solutions to the problem of underage drinking in our community. The group met at LifeBridge and included the mayor, chief of police, health department representatives, school officials, and a member of LifeBridge who also was a parent.

“I didn’t know who this church-guy was and had to adjust my preconceived notions about Christians. I found that he was intensely interested in finding real solutions. Later I realized that he was not just a repre-

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sentative of the church and a parent, but also a preacher . . . the senior minister! He wasn't what I expected.

"Over the weeks I realized that LifeBridge had been offering its people and facilities to our community in many large and small ways. I could see that these people were making a difference. I had, in my own way, worked to make the community better, but I wanted to be a part of a bigger plan. When my wife and I decided it was time to try church, I was attracted to LifeBridge because the people there were not only Christians, but had invested themselves in my town. I found myself being drawn to them.

"My wife, Lois, and I had been discussing going to church for some time but had done nothing about it. While I was gone on a hunting trip, she attended a church near our home. I went with her the following week but felt no connection to the sermon message. I suggested that we try LifeBridge the next week. The sermon was positive and compelling, the music inspiring, and the fellowship very positive. We got involved with a 'beginners' Sunday school class and made many new friends.

"I learned about accepting the Lord as my Savior and was baptized that spring. My faith has continued to grow and mature as I've become involved in a couples' Bible study, prayer breakfasts, and a mission trip to Thailand. Now I'm focused on volunteer work to enhance community outreach. As an educator for more than 30 years, I thought my life had great purpose, but working on behalf of the kingdom has taught me what purpose really is!"

### Our Church's Focus

The focus at LifeBridge has broadened significantly. We used to say to our people, "Invite. Bring your friends. You get them here and we'll teach them about Jesus." Now we also say, "Get involved. Find ways to

build bridges." We have in the past poured a lot of manpower and budget dollars into events like "What the Dickens," a Christmas project, or Easter or Fourth of July pageants. Those events have brought thousands of people into our facilities. The programs have perhaps whetted their appetites to return for a worship service or a class. Each event has been the first step for many families and individuals who are now an active and growing part of LifeBridge.

Now we are developing strategies to channel our volunteers, both individually and in organized groups, back across the street, into the community. Linda cooks lunch at the community soup kitchen. Sandy is part of a team available for crisis counseling in the schools. Henry helps seniors with their tax forms at the Senior Center. Others are tutors or teach in the English as a Second Language programs. Some deliver Meals on Wheels. Others serve as as-



Ken and Diane Goldsberry help spruce up the Longmont (Colorado) Humane Society. Church members are building bridges to the community through their volunteer efforts.

sistant coaches in the sports programs in middle schools.

Time To Serve is the name for our entry-level way to prepare and equip LifeBridge people to cross the street. We began by asking some of the non-profit agencies in town. "How can we help you? What kind of resources and manpower do you need?" More than 1,500 adults and their children gave more than 6,000 hours to about two dozen projects in December 2002. They cleaned school buildings, built a playground, remodeled rooms at a shelter for battered women, wrapped presents for elderly people whose fingers no longer manipulate tape and ribbon, and worked on a trail in a National Forest.

Perhaps one of the best snapshots of Time To Serve is the story of Grandview Trailer Park. A year ago middle school students, along with their coaches and parents, offered to clear the grounds and do small repairs. The residents were skeptical and wary. A year later, the same folks could hardly wait for the group to return. Families had become acquainted and visited during the year. Some residents now knew the kids by name. The project accomplished our goal: Service to the community. Rapport created. Relationships built. Trust established.

"The results are not entirely predictable in ministry like this," says Rusaw. "It's certain that we will get our feet wet and maybe even muddy. At the very least we have benefited the community through our service. As we build relational bridges, we watch for opportunities to share God's grace at whatever point of need we may find. And then we see lives transformed as they both see and hear God's grace at work in their world."

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