

"Absolutely joyful, but scary too"

Pastor, congregation find new life and transformation going through "New Beginnings" assessment

by Paul Seebeck, Communications Associate

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"It's absolutely joyful, but scary, too," says Michael Davis, associate presbyter of congregational development for the [Presbytery of Middle Tennessee](#). He's reflecting on the change happening in the church he serves. [Glenclyff Presbyterian](#), a congregation of fewer than 50, recently decided to allocate a percentage of its resources to join a "parallel start" for a Hispanic new church development (NCD).

The decision to partner in this Presbyterian mission came after the congregation went through a "[New Beginnings](#)" assessment offered by the [office of Church Growth](#). "We were in decline," says Davis. "God used 'New Beginnings' to help our congregation understand that our future as a Presbyterian church in this community would be through ministry to a different culture and generation of people."

The growing Hispanic-Latino population in Glenclyff, just south of downtown Nashville, is nearly 40 percent. At the elementary school nearest the church, about 25 different languages are spoken. About five years ago, Glenclyff started reaching out to their new neighbors, offering English as second language classes, Bible study, tutoring, child care, and community outreach cookouts. But Davis felt they needed to do more. In 2009, the congregation went through an appreciative inquiry process. Davis remembers telling the leader working with him, "I just wish I could say to the congregation, 'This is what we need to do—some broader Hispanic-Latino ministry.'" Her response challenged him. "They have concerns about their future, but they're ready for you to lead." Davis wasn't sure what the broader Hispanic-Latino ministry would like, or how Glenclyff would be able to do it. "I remember saying, 'We can't do this alone.'"

"New Beginnings" helped Glenclyff make sense of it all by looking closely at their financial health, resources for ministry, changing demographics, and their own potential for change. "One of the things 'New Beginnings' does is show people how disconnected the church can be from the community," says Davis. "It was helpful for us to see how many resources we were using for ministry to us, rather than others. We also learned that only seven of us lived within a seven-mile radius of the church."

For six weeks congregation members met in small groups discussing the "New Beginnings" assessors' report. In follow-up training they began to narrow strategies for how best to move into the future. "One of the options discussed was to continue to use up all of our resources on ourselves, and then close the church," says Davis. "But they didn't want to do that—they wanted to do ministry in their community."



Glenclyff Presbyterian Church
Photo by Glenclyff Presbyterian Church

As Davis listened to three small groups, each trying to reach a consensus of what they might do together in future ministry, he began to change. “‘New Beginnings’ helped me get out of the way, to let God’s spirit work in people’s lives as they determined what their future together might look like.” Davis intentionally stayed away as each small group got closer to making a decision. He remembers being uncertain about how it was going to turn out. It was then as he prayed that he had a “wow” moment. “I felt we had done what we were supposed to do, that God was working in the hearts of the people through this ‘New Beginnings’ process. I could trust that.”

When all three groups recommended allocating a percentage of their financial resources, the building and energy to do this parallel start for a Hispanic new church development, Davis was delighted. “It’s great affirmation,” he says. “We know this is where God wants us to go.” Leaders at Glenclyff like octogenarians Betty Curry and Corky Hartman agree. “Our God is for everybody; we’re here to bring this message to other people,” says Curry. “Our church may be different in the future, but there will be a place to worship in our community,” adds Hartman. “‘New Beginnings’ showed us how we could be part of bringing hope to our changing neighborhood.”

Glenclyff has joined the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee, the [Synod of Living Waters](#), and [Church Growth ministry](#) to begin this parallel start Hispanic NCD. [LaVergne Presbyterian](#), one of the presbytery’s smallest churches, has offered the use of its building.

“You can’t imagine my joy,” says Michael Davis, who still remembers that moment years ago when he said, “It’s time to do more, but we cannot do it alone.” We don’t know the details of how it’s going to work out, but we know God is leading us on this journey. I had no idea what we could accomplish together in Presbytery mission.”

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