

An Interview with Pastor Michael Beck, Wildwood and St. Marks UMC Wildwood and Ocala, Florida

www.michaeladambeck.com

By Rev. Juli Lejman-Guy, CENetwork of the ELCA

This month's congregational highlight is Wildwood (awa 100) and St. Marks (awa 80) UMC in Wildwood and Ocala, Florida. We met Reverend Michael Beck through the Northwestern Ohio Synod Innovator's Academy. Through innovative and empowered ministries, Pastor Beck and his team continue to reach people in new and unexpected places called *Fresh Expressions*.

Describe the initiative(s) that your congregation is participating in that promotes members living out their faith in daily life.

These two traditional Methodist congregations oversee a network of 15 Fresh Expressions. These are small Christian communities formed around people's common interests and practices. Lay people serve as "pastors" of these micro-communities. This is a "blended ecology" of church in which inherited and emerging modes of church live together. The traditional congregations have grown as a result of the Fresh Expressions. The laity are released as a "priesthood of all believers." There is an expectation that everyone will be involved in mission. We commonly joke "no pew potatoes allowed!"



What was the spark that caused you to go in this direction?

Both congregations were in significant decline for decades. They were not connecting with the larger communities in any fruitful way. The goal is to be church with people who don't get to church and form people as fully devoted disciples of Jesus. The initiative through Wildwood has evolved over the last ten years. St. Marks has been engaged for almost a year.



What group(s) is/are involved? (adults, youth, children, families, etc.)

Each of the Fresh Expressions are very diverse. Some are comprised of senior citizens doing crafts together. Others are made up entirely of children. Mostly Millennials and Gen Z gather in "Tattoo Parlor Church" or "Skate. Pray. Repeat." All those groups come together sometimes for larger worship experiences or community events.

Describe what happens.

Wildwood United Methodist Church, Florida has started over fourteen new Christian communities in the past eight years, including:

- Arts for Love. Art enthusiasts gather to pray, worship, and create art together.
- Blessing Bags. A group worships and prays as members collect and distribute necessary items for people experiencing homelessness.

- Burritos and Bibles. Seekers gather in Moe's Southwest Grill for burritos, prayer, Scripture, and Holy Communion.
- Church 3.1. Young professionals run 5k (3.1 miles), pray, and have a conversation about some verses from Scripture.
- Connect. A church for children involves fun activities, breakfast, Jesus stories, and worship in the local Community Center.
- Faithfully Fit. Health enthusiasts meet in the park for prayer, devotions, and walking the track.
- Higher Power Hour. Seekers in recovery explore spiritual practices including prayer and poetry.
- Mascara Mondays. A handful of women gather in the local coffee shop for prayer and Bible reflection.
- Paws of Praise. Dog lovers gather in the local dog park for prayer, worship, Scripture, and play.
- Shear Love at Soul Salon. A pop-up salon offers free haircuts, prayer, and a Bible reflection.
- Skate. Pray. Repeat. A group of friends gather at indoor rinks and outdoor tracks to skate, pray, and share their faith.
- Tattoo Parlor Church. Seekers receive faith-based tattoos and worship Christ with Holy Communion.
- Trap Stars for Jesus. Ex and current drug dealers learn how to start legitimate businesses, with prayer and Scripture mixed in.

When COVID-19 struck, they cultivated new digital communities:

- Yoga Church Digital. Rather than meeting in a studio, a live devotional and yoga practice was broadcasted into people's homes through Facebook and YouTube.
- Supper Table Church. Young parents who found themselves isolated in quarantine suddenly became homeschool teachers overnight. So these parents prepared themed meals, placed a screen at the supper table, and joined together digitally to eat, converse, pray, and share ideas.
- Paws of Praise Digital. Animal lovers gathered with their pets on screens using Zoom rooms to share in conversations and showcase their pets' unique personalities.
- Living Room Church. A network of Christians met digitally from their homes to pray, worship, have communion, and share in sermonic conversations.

What has been the response to what you are doing?

Most inherited church folks are excited about the fresh expressions. Some are hostile to some of the edgier communities like tattoo parlor or yoga church. Many are just indifferent as long as we don't tamper with their worship service.

Have you done any type of formal evaluation? If so, what?

Our team meets monthly to share what's going on, learn from each other, and discern what new things need to be started, or some things that need to stop.

What was the most unexpected outcome?

There have been around 300 baptisms and professions of faith in ten years. The church was worshipping at 30 people ten years ago. At St Marks, just since Easter Sunday 2021, we've had 12 baptisms already. The unexpected outcome was the growth of the inherited churches. Our focus was cultivating new Christian communities with people who don't go to church. But many have joined into the life of the inherited congregation.

What would you change about it?

There are lots of failures involved, but I wouldn't necessarily say I'd change anything. The only failure is not learning from failure. One thing I would do was never start the Fresh Expressions myself. In the beginning I was starting everything without a team and it wasn't sustainable. I shifted to having the lay person start the Fresh Expression with me as their supporter and encourager.

What are your next steps?

Our next steps are to try and survive the pandemic without losing anyone!

What advice would you give someone hoping to start something similar in their congregation?

- find a friend or more (i.e. team)
- prayerfully discover a simple way to love the people around you
- deepen relationships with them
- share your feelings about Christ as part of a fuller life, and
- encourage those finding faith to form a small Christian community where they are and connect to the wider church.

For more information about Fresh Expressions, you can check out Pastor Beck's web site at:

michaeladambeck.com and <https://www.facebook.com/reverendwild1>