



40 days of blessing others transforms Chicago church

By Kirk Noonan
Photography by
Gaylon Wampler

When Kim Lee's name was called she screamed, ran out of the tent, did a twirl then yelled, "Thank You, Jesus." Seconds later she raced into the tent and to the pulpit where Ray Berryhill, pastor of Evangel World Outreach Church, handed her the keys to a gently used Mitsubishi Gallant.

The unusual giveaway at the church was the culmination of an ambitious evangelistic outreach known as 40 Days of Blessing, which took aim at the blue-collar community surrounding the church in northwest Chicago.

Though the goal of the outreach was to share the gospel, Berryhill and his congregation received more than an opportunity to share their faith — they received a healing balm after a difficult season in the church's history.



Pastor Ray Berryhill

40 days of blessing others

Regrouping

For two years before the outreach, which was held in July and August, Berryhill spent much time negotiating to buy a neighboring church. As the congregations hammered out a deal, Berryhill says countless hours were spent in prayer, securing loans and preparing for a move. During this time Berryhill says he saw God open many doors for the church that led him to believe the transaction was

imminent. But only weeks before the sale's completion the leaders of the other church balked.

"They had agreed to terms, but they became unreasonable," says Berryhill, noting that the leaders from the other church said they would sell the church but not move. "I was devastated and broken."

The deal fell through and two years of hard work evaporated like steam before Berryhill's eyes — as

did the promise of more space to accommodate the church's growing congregation and the student body of the school Evangel World Outreach Church runs.

Berryhill was baffled.

Why would God take the church so far only to let it fail?

"Out of my brokenness and pain I cried out to the Lord," he admits. "In doing so, God spoke to me about being a blessing."

Having taken his congregation through Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, Berryhill wondered what would happen if the church blessed those in need in the community and in the church for 40 days.

Practicing blessing

When he shared the idea with his staff they embraced it. Leaders distributed business cards reading "You've just been blessed" on one side and "Pass it on" on the opposite side.

Berryhill began preaching the principles of blessing others. Saturdays and Sundays became days for the church to bless the community through outreach events and what they called centerpiece giveaways. Wednesday evenings were used to bless families within the church.

On the first Saturday of the 40-day outreach, 80 volunteers fueled cars and served food and drinks at a local service station. The church, along with a corporate sponsor, paid for the gasoline of 100 customers.

The next week church volunteers were dispatched to a restaurant to serve 100 free meals. On another Saturday the church and a local business owner provided more than 100 free oil changes for single mothers.

In the following weeks, family vacations were given away. People's utilities and gas bills were paid for a month and even a year. One woman came to the church and learned she would receive a year's



group members offered to randomly bless those in need with cash, groceries, utility bill payments and gift certificates.

Iris Alvarado spent many days this year in the hospital. Bills piled up on her kitchen table, and she worried they wouldn't be paid. Then the church offered to pay her utility bill for a month, in addition to the random drawing that same day for an entire year.

"I shouldn't have been surprised [by God's blessing], but I was touched, and speechless," she says. "I knew then that everything would be OK."

Since then, Alvarado and her husband have been volunteering at the outreaches — it's their way of giving back.

"Since we don't have money to give, we have volunteered our time," she says. "Sometimes that's the greatest thing you can give someone."

Sacrificial giving

It might seem Evangel Outreach Church is filled with people who are well off. That's not the case. Most people who attend the church range from working poor to middle class.

"If everyone can do a little, the church can do a lot," Berryhill says.

worth of groceries. The good deeds didn't stop.

Church volunteers went to a coin-operated laundry and carried people's clothing from their cars to the washers and paid for the wash and dry. Individuals and small groups within the church donated money to the church's endeavors and also gave and served others on their own.

"It's a blessing to be a blessing," says Loretha Styles, who attends the church.

Styles saw a young mother at a gas station using her last three dollars to purchase gas. Not wanting to miss an opportunity to bless someone, Styles paid to have the woman's car filled with fuel. The woman was astonished. Styles simply smiled and told her to pass on the blessing.

"This was our way to get the church outside of itself," Berryhill says. "We believed by doing simple random acts of kindness Chicago could be blessed."

The spirit of blessing others was clearly evident during the giveaways on Sunday mornings, as ministry volunteers and cell



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"Our people rose to the challenge of giving."

As did major corporations and local businesses that got behind the outreach by offering comp services and products after meeting with church leaders.

The generosity changed lives. "It was truly a miracle for me," says Bernadine Hebron, who learned the church would pay her utility bills for an entire year. "For anyone out there thinking there is no hope — there is hope."

Grand finale

On the 40th day of the outreach — a Sunday morning in August — the large, white tent on the church's parking lot where services were held is filled to capacity. More than 1,000 worshippers are in attendance.

Berryhill leads the choir and band in a 28-minute gospel medley. He waves and flings his arms enthusiastically, silencing instruments

or singers on command. On the busy street in front of the church, cars are bumper to bumper

as drivers and passengers crane for a peek underneath the big top.

On one side of the tent, almost hidden by a mound of groceries donated by Convoy of Hope, volunteers tend to slabs of ribs, chickens, burgers and hotdogs to be served at no charge after service.

The smell of barbecue is almost intoxicating. But for many people, so is the possibility of driving home the Mitsubishi Gallant parked and roped off in front of the tent.

"That's a fine car," says one man admiringly.

Yesterday on this same lot hundreds of people received free clothing, furniture, bags of groceries, health screenings, haircuts and an opportunity to meet with representatives from local companies who were seeking employees.

Today, Lee will win the car and several other people will take home gifts such as laptop computers, new clothes and school supplies. But even more important, more than 120 people will commit themselves to a relationship with Christ during the service.

"This outreach has been a revival for this church and community," says Juan Aviles, associate pastor at the church. "By leaving the building we have grown."

Since the outreaches started and the tent went up, Aviles says, between 20 and 40 people per week have made first-time commitments to Christ during the Sunday morning services.

"In the process of us being a blessing we've seen healings and God's provision," Berryhill



40 days of blessing others

adds, "and we haven't had a summer slump either."

Spiritual resolution

When Berryhill reflects on the impetus for the outreach he recalls feeling impressed to stop looking at himself and his problems

and instead look for ways to help people.

Though their need for a bigger building still exists and is even more pronounced with a growing flock of new converts, Berryhill accepts the church's realities like a man without a care in the world.

"A fresh wind has blown through

our church because we are not focusing on ourselves; we are trying to reach souls," he says. "That has taken the pressure off me and put it on God. The 40 days of blessing is not just an outreach; it's a process."

It's a process with no end in sight that has healed a pastor's broken heart, touched countless people in a major city and encouraged a growing congregation to continue doing great things for God — and all because a real estate deal fell through. **tpe**

Editor's note: Recently the church entered negotiations with the Chicago Board of Education regarding property that could house a congregation of more than 1,000 people.

KIRK NOONAN is associate editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Better to give than receive

During the 40 Days of Blessing more than:

- 1,300 individuals were directly blessed through the various outreaches
- 200 people responded to the altar calls for salvation and rededication
- 120 expressed an interest in church membership
- 700 first-time visitors attended Sunday and Wednesday services
- 300 members of Evangel participated in churchwide servant evangelism projects and volunteer opportunities

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