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Signs of change

A once-struggling Florida congregation is bursting with new life after being adopted by a thriving multi-site megachurch, Grace Church.

by [Bob Wells](#)



Image courtesy of Grace Central

Before Grace Central was adopted by Grace Church, Wednesday dinners only drew a handful of people. Now as many as 150 attend from the church and surrounding neighborhood.

January 18, 2011

Jim Massie knew that Central United Methodist Church, the Fort Myers, Fla., church he'd attended all his 72 years, had to change or die.

He was open to being adopted by Grace Church, a thriving multi-site megachurch across the river in Cape Coral. He was even OK having a woman pastor, the Rev. Arlene Jackson, who came from Grace to lead the church during a yearlong discernment period.

But then she started putting signs all around the church property: "Free Neighborhood Dinner, Wednesdays, 6:30 p.m."

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"I thought she was nuts," Massie said. "I didn't want to be competition for the Salvation Army. I wanted the old, traditional church like everyone else."

Central UMC had held Wednesday dinners for years, but they hadn't been advertised, and few from the neighborhood had come -- fortunately. It wasn't the same neighborhood Massie and other church members had moved away from years ago. No telling who might show up.

But it's been a surprising year and a half for Central UMC, which in August 2010 became Grace Central, the fourth and most recent campus of Grace Church.

"The biggest surprise to me is me," Massie said.

When the signs popped up, Massie wanted to run them over with his car. Now, each week he and his wife, Shari, help coordinate the meal that draws as many as 150 people from the church and surrounding neighborhood.

Groups from throughout Cape Coral-Fort Myers -- churches, a teen theater troupe, the school district, the Lee County Sheriff's Office and more -- sign up far in advance to sponsor the dinners, supplying food and volunteers. The same fellowship hall where Massie's mother served crowded dinners a half-century ago is bursting with life that Massie never thought he'd see again.

"This is our ministry," Massie said, as he flipped through his photo album of each week's dinner. "We've made all kinds of new friends. There's a new group and new people every week."

But Wednesday dinners and a retiree's heart aren't all that's changed at Central since July 2009, when Central and Grace signed an agreement exploring adoption.

Along with the Rev. Jackson, Grace sent 25 people from throughout its other campuses to attend Central.

Before going to Central to serve as pastor, Jackson was on the Grace staff for four years. A recovering alcoholic, Jackson headed the recovery and outreach ministries at the Cape Coral campus and served earlier as a Celebrate Recovery ministry leader. She was licensed by the UMC as a local pastor, authorized to serve the Central campus, in 2009 and is pursuing ordination through Course of Study.

She was struck, upon arriving at Central, by how distant the congregation had grown from the surrounding community.

"One of the first things I noticed was that everybody inside was 85 and white and everybody outside in the neighborhood, according to the demographics, was 30 percent Hispanic, 30 percent white and 30 percent African-American," Jackson said.

"Unless the inside of a church looks like the outside, it's not going to be successful. When you open the door, it should be a permeable membrane, where it all looks the same, sounds the same, the music is the same and the language is the same."

Soon after her arrival, Jackson went around the church, removing the large laminated "No Trespassing" posters that were in virtually every window. "I took down everything that said, 'Don't,' 'Stop,' 'No,' 'Stay out,' 'You can't,' 'Must not,' 'Should not.'"

Then she looked for a "spark."

"Nothing is dead 100 percent," she said. "If the doors are open, there's a spark. It's got to be somewhere. So where's the spark? Sometimes you have to dig for it. And where the spark was, was on Wednesday."

Though the Wednesday dinner drew only a handful of people, it was a small sign of life, a spark that Jackson kindled and fed and blew upon until it burst into flame. Within a month, the small Bible study

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that followed the dinner expanded to a full-blown worship service. Then came the “Free Neighborhood Dinner” signs.

Questions to consider:

- In what ways might your church be saying “No,” “Don’t,” “Stop,” to the surrounding community?
- What are the big questions that your church or community faces? How does it discern those questions together? Whose voices are heard?
- Is there a “spark” in your church or community that is just waiting to burst into flame? What is it? What would it take to become fire?

Meanwhile, a team from throughout Central worked for months under the guidance of an outside consultant to explore the proposed merger. They read books, watched films and immersed themselves in information about the neighborhood. For many, it was a different experience.

“It wasn’t a church council or a board,” Jackson said. “A team is a different dynamic, and we were a team.”

The members had a special burden, Jackson said, bringing the prospect of change to others at Central. “I was new,” Jackson said. “My word meant very little, but their word meant a lot.”

Bill Guyn, 61, a Central member for more than 30 years, served on the discernment team and called the experience “an eye-opener.”

In hindsight, he wonders if they could have done a better job communicating with others in the church. When the discernment period ended, 17 people voted to close the church rather than become part of Grace. They have since left.

But he has no regrets about the merger and is amazed to see long-hoped-for changes actually happening.

“I think John Wesley would be darn proud,” he said.

Guyn’s wife, Judy Guyn, 64, said one of the most extraordinary changes has been simply having a vision and mission that “doesn’t just sit on a shelf” but is posted, available and known to everyone.

“Now, people make plans together and things happen,” she said. “You put a sign out that says ‘Free Wednesday Dinner’ and people come. You have a church makeover and people turn out and it happens.”

The church added a second Sunday service, a contemporary one, and together the two now draw 130 people, up from barely 50 before. New ministries, including a clothes closet and a bread ministry, are reaching out to the neighborhood. A Brazilian congregation holds services at the church two nights a week. A December 2010 block party featuring games, live music and free food drew 400 people. On Christmas Eve, the church distributed toys to more than 100 neighborhood children.

“Before, there was Wednesday night and the one service Sunday morning, and that was it,” Judy Guyn said. “Now, something is going on every day.”

Paul Nixon, a new-church strategist with the United Methodist Church’s General Board of Discipleship, said the influx of new people has an immediate impact when a larger church adopts a smaller one.

“It floods the place with a new DNA, spirit and capacity for ministry,” he said. Nixon cautions, however, that church adoptions or “friendly takeovers” work only when at least one of the churches is vibrant and strong. Merging two declining congregations rarely produces a thriving church, he said.

Though the UMC does not have firm numbers, Nixon said an increasing number of UMC churches are adopting “under-functioning” churches as new campuses, perhaps 24 a year or more, or a quarter of all UMC church starts. If so, it’s a trend that the Rev. Timothy Whitaker, bishop of the UMC’s Florida Annual Conference, applauds.

A bishop alone has few tools to turn around a struggling congregation, Whitaker said. He or she can “parachute in” a new pastor or send a coach to work with the congregation, but ultimately, it’s still up to the people in that church to turn things around. But when a vibrant church such as Grace sends in

new resources, it is a dynamically different situation, Whitaker said.

He'll get no argument from Massie and the Guyns. They are sold on being part of Grace Church and the whole philosophy of church adoptions.

"It makes sense," Judy Guyn said. "Why not adopt and use the building that's already there in the community where people are?"

Central UMC -- or Grand Avenue Methodist, as it was called when it was founded -- was built to serve God and save souls, Massie said.

"I don't know where we'll end up," he said. "But now we're doing the things the church was built for."

All Jackson can tell them is to hang on.

"I've seen what God can do," Jackson said. "This is just the beginning."