

**Reaching people:  
Block parties take the church to the people**  
By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Miami, Florida—To reach people, Christians need to get out of the church and go where non-Christians are.

That philosophy is what motivated Pastor Dick Thomassian to pack 40 people and what seemed like a ton of equipment into a bus and drive them from Huntsville, Alabama, to Miami, Florida, for a week of block parties, children's ministries and street evangelism.

Thomassian has been doing this kind of ministry at least once a month for seven years as the Minister of Missions at Whitesburg Baptist Church in Huntsville.

“We have been to between 30 and 35 countries, almost all of the U.S. states, and we have seen over 50,000 decisions for Christ during that time,” Thomassian reported.

Block parties are his specialty—he has led more than 500 of them. Working with the 40 volunteers on a recent week-long swing through south Florida, the pastor presented up to three two-hour block parties a day featuring puppet shows, mini dramas, live music and an evangelistic message.

Working with Westchester Community Church, a new church start for second generation Hispanics on the west side of Miami-Dade County, the group presented a lively program to a gathering of neighborhood residents and a soccer team playing on a nearby field.

Eight people, including at least one of the soccer players, raised their hand in response to Thomassian's invitation to accept Jesus as their Savior.

“The key is to get out of the church,” the pastor explained. “Christians need to go where the people are and to get involved.”

“Many people won't come to church to be saved,” added Amy Sheehan, a former member of the Huntsville church who now lives in Houston, Texas. “I moved away but I keep coming back because I agree with what they are doing. I see many people coming to Christ.”

Doug Seaver who works with Pastor Thomassian in an alongside ministry called Training In Mission and Evangelism (TIME) said that people feel more comfortable in an outdoor, informal situation than they do in a church. He said that at times, the mission teams have sponsored block parties for more than 500 people.

“Much of our purpose is to help train pastors and lay people in the art and study of evangelism,” Seaver said. “In addition to the block parties, we sponsor outdoor crusades, revivals and Vacation Bible Schools.”

Among those being trained on the Florida trip was Anna Hatchet as she counseled one neighborhood child who raised his hand in response to the invitation.

“I’m learning how to share my faith with others,” said Hatchet who will be a high school senior this fall. Expressing her reaction to counseling with the child, she said, “I felt excited because I played a part in his salvation.”

The Alabama group spent a week in the Miami area, presenting block parties in Hispanic, African-American, Anglo and Haitian churches, as well as at the Miami Rescue Mission, the area’s major evangelical homeless and rehabilitation shelter.

The block party and other efforts by the group were an encouragement to the Westchester church that started holding services just eight months ago. “It gave a push to me and to the church members who were there,” said Pastor Ralph Tone. “It showed us the importance of getting out and the quality of the evangelistic work they did made evangelism attractive.”

Tone said that by attracting people from the neighborhood, the party offered an opportunity for follow up with those who indicated an interest. “It gave a quantum leap in the quality of visitation,” Tone said. “It moved us from cold visitation to hot visitation where we are dealing with recognizable faces.”

Up to now, Tone said that the church had been built by the “head banging work of visitation. Most people have come because of a personal invitation.”

The church began last October with six people in attendance, including Tone’s wife Laurie and their two children Kimberly and Leah. “We have a core group of around 25 now,” he said.

The Westchester church start is one of several dozen being developed in the Miami area through the “For You Miami” project of the Miami Baptist Association.

Thomassian, who is 70, said that he plans on continuing with the evangelistic mission trips as long as he has health and the Lord wants him to.

Thomassian, who served for a number of years with what is now the International Mission Board, reflected, “He knows that I have a heart heavy for the Lord and missions.”

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