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Bella Vista Churches Welcome Children

Changing Demographics Reflected In Programs, Building Projects

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BELLA VISTA — For the first 12 years they lived in Bella Vista, the church Al and Shirley Jenkins attend was made up almost entirely of retirees.

That began to change in 2004, as the village became home to a growing number of young families. Their church, the Bella Vista Assembly of God, reached out in welcome. The sound of children's voices and running feet filled the hallways. Services combined contemporary music with traditional hymns.

Today, the congregation is about half young families and half retirees, said senior pastor Jonathan Watson. A \$1.5 million expansion is slated for completion by the end of the year. The 15,000-square-foot addition will feature a youth auditorium, a gymnasium and two floors of space for children's ministries.

The growth reflects the changing demographics in Bella Vista in the past several years. The longtime retirement community has become a mecca for young families seeking inexpensive homes. During the peak of the housing market in 2006, the average price for a house in Bella Vista was \$91.02 per square foot, compared to \$100.50 in Bentonville and \$102.43 in Rogers, said Kathy Deck, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Arkansas.

A special census conducted for the city in 2008 found that nearly 21 percent of the 11,104 households in the village are made up of families with children under age 18.

"Bella Vista is an economically advantageous place to live," Watson said. "It's perfect as a bedroom community (to Bentonville or Rogers)."

The influx of young families has brought changes to congregations formerly defined by their gray hair. Adult meeting rooms have been renovated as classrooms and nurseries. Worship services have taken a contemporary slant. People who thought they were through supporting children have been asked to pony up funds for expansion.

"The older people have made an investment in the kids," said Frankie Kelley, a children's volunteer at the Assembly of God church and a parent of children ages 14, 19 and 20. "They've made some sacrifices. Some of them have stepped up to teach Sunday school, when they hadn't done that in years. ... They've always been that willing to help and be a part of what the Lord's wanting to do."

Congregations Change

Bella Vista Christian Church is also expanding. The nearly \$2 million project includes a 6,000-square-foot wing and a renovation of the existing facility. The growth is fueled by a need for more space for children's programming, said Fred Ely, chairman of the church board and chairman of the building committee.

"We're busting at the seams with young families." Church members are supportive, despite the tight economic times, he said. They recognize the need to serve children and families. Five years ago, there were less than 20 children in church on Sunday. Now there are up to 100.

The changing demographics have required older church members to adjust, said Dave Cooper, director of senior ministries at the church.

"Bella Vista started out as a retirement community. There was some grumbling. But the great majority — 95 percent — have come over," he said. The church offers two services — contemporary and traditional. When that started, "it was almost like there were two churches," Ely said. "Now, we're one church that fellowships at two different times."

The entire congregation gets together for one "baby dedication" service several times a year, Cooper said.

Older church members are in a unique position to contribute life experience and time, said Jennifer Siebert, early childhood director at the church. A number of seniors volunteer in the nursery and with the regional Mothers Of Preschoolers group at the church, taking care of babies and toddlers while young moms meet.

"For us, it's a huge blessing," she said, speaking on behalf of young parents at the church. "Many of our families have no grandparents here. We moved here for jobs. Retired folks fill that need, in a way. We enjoy being part of this with them."

As church programs tilt toward children and families, older members can feel left out. Several churches — such as Bella Vista Christian and First United Methodist Church of Bella Vista — have ramped up their senior programs in response. Speakers, concerts and road trips focus on the interests of the older crowd.

First United Methodist has grown from one child four years ago to 60, said Jan Lowe, assistant to the senior pastor and director of lay ministries. Adult meeting space has been converted to children's classrooms. A contemporary service was added in March.

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"Many (seniors) now say they can't imagine what church would be like without kids here," Lowe said. "We just couldn't be more excited. It's great."

Children More Visible

Churches that have courted young families have seen the most growth. Others are playing catch-up as they realize the changing demographics are here to stay.

Highlands Church, a United Methodist congregation on the west side of town, is launching a brand-new children's and youth ministry this month. A family cook-out and movie night is slated for Aug. 14. Future gatherings include a family game night, a fall festival, a scavenger hunt for a local food bank and Christmas caroling.

The goal is to start weekly children's programming in January, said Patti Crittenden, a member of the children's ministry planning committee. Another priority is erecting a playground in a visible location on church grounds. That will signal the church's receptivity to children and families.

"The dynamics of Bella Vista have changed," she said. "We need to meet the needs of young families."

The Highlands community has experienced less growth than the center of town, Crittenden said. But recent numbers from the Gravette School District, where Highlands kids attend school, show 285 children in the area.

A few months ago, only two attended the Methodist church. Today there are five. The first confirmation class at the church graduated a few months ago.

Crittenden, the grandmother of two young children, knows from experience how difficult it is to bring children into a church where there are no programs to support them, she said.

"You want people to come to church," she said. "You don't want them not to come because they don't feel welcome."

St. Bernard's Catholic Church in Bella Vista is revamping its children's program to attract more youth, said Irene Wallace, coordinator of children's programs. Many Catholic families in the village take their children to St. Stephen's in Bentonville as a matter of course, she said. Some have been surprised to find St. Bernard's has a children's program.

An informal program has existed for a number of years. Wallace, a retired school principal, was asked to design a more structured program. She began implementing changes in the fall of 2007. The church now offers a Catholic-approved curriculum and teacher training, she said. Her goal is to have a standardized program in place for pre-kindergarten through 12th grade by the fall of 2010.

She's made no push for recruitment yet, although the program has grown by about 10 children. The biggest difference is in attendance. There are 60-some children at church every week now, she said.

The changes have made them more visible. An often-heard comment, one noted by spokesmen at numerous Bella Vista churches, now fills the pews, Wallace said.

"Where have all these kids come from?"

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