

Our Journey with Christ

We want to share with you a little about the Emerging Congregation in Tarpon Springs.

This ministry was established about nine years before we started attending. It was like no “church” we had ever been involved with before, and to be honest, we were very uncomfortable at first.

The Church there was in three store fronts on Main Street in New Port Richey, FL. **X 100**

One store front was for food prep **X101** and serving, one was where we ate **X102** and the third was our **X103** sanctuary.

Most of the congregation was homeless, disadvantaged, disabled, and lost.

The pastor, Jerome, **X104** was a recovering alcoholic, and had been homeless. He understood the people in a way we never could. He became our mentor. He taught us things like, “accept them where they are, and love them.” just to name a few. If someone reached out to shake a hand Pastor Jerome pulled them into a hug. **X105**

He said, “That may be the only touch, they get all week long.” He became our brother and we loved him dearly. Little did we know all these lessons he was teaching us would equip us to carry on the ministry when he passed away.

Just before this happened, our leadership group, had been talking about relocating the congregation eight miles away to Tarpon Springs Fl.

Our biggest worry was how to get everyone to church. We didn’t want to leave anyone behind. The Florida Mission Center helped us buy a second van **X106** to transport our group the eight miles to our new location. The Mission Center even loaned us one of the Mission Center presidents **X107** to be acting pastor for a year to help us during the transition.

One of the first things our group did was repair the baptismal font **X108**.

The second thing our group did was add two projectors **X109** in the sanctuary so we could use contemporary Christian music.

We have baptized and confirmed over 30 **X110** into the family of Christ.

We have ordained two, **X111 X112** and have one more priesthood call approved and accepted.

This ministry is not for everyone and you can burn out very quickly. It is very demanding and yet very rewarding. **X113** You don't have the resources or the leadership that you might have in a traditional congregation.

It requires a lot of patience and understanding and lots of love. It can tear at your heart and your very core. It requires a change in your thinking. You have to **get past, thinking** "They want to be homeless; they deserve to be homeless, they are lazy, or, they can change if they want to." Some of our folks can't read or write. They need love and help, and acceptance, **X114** and a new vision for their life.

They need to be told that God accepts them where they are and so do we. They feel worthless and we have

tell them over and over that they are God's and he loves them. It doesn't matter who you are, or where you have been, or what you have done, you are a child of

God. **X115**

God created you and calls you to journey with him, for a new purpose and a new cause, and that cause is the establishment of his Kingdom on earth.

Because of their choices in the past, there are consequences that they have to deal with, and that is hard to bear. They often can't find or see a way forward.

Sometimes they take one step forward, and then two steps back. You want to "fix" things for them, to get them to a better place in their lives.

I expect God thinks the same about us from time to time.

We have a good personal relationship with the Lord, things are going well, and then we slip away. We wonder where God went! He didn't go anywhere, we did.

Our group is no different. Our motto is, **X116** "You come as friends and you leave as family".

We have a small emergency food pantry **X117** for those that need help getting through the month or week. We have racks of clothing **X118** that have been donated by other Community of Christ congregations and individuals that enable our group to “shop” for clean clothes. We had T-shirts **X119** donated to our group. Some individuals and congregations donate to us through the Mission Center to help support the ministry.

One individual purchased a new kitchen stove for us.**X120** The generosity and compassion of others make our ministry possible.

Bicycles are a hot commodity. **X121** We provide them With bicycles **X122** that have been donated, by congregations and a local bicycle shop. We provide them with bike helmets and locks.

We provide them with **X123** personal items like soap, toothpaste, shampoo, deodorant etc., and a back pack.

We also supply tents, sleeping bags, blankets, and insect spray.

If someone gets a place to live, we help them get **X124** furniture and household items. **X125**

We serve breakfast every Sunday morning of, **X126** eggs, sausage, biscuits and gravy, grits, and pancakes. No one touches their plate until it gets to the end of the serving line. We wear masks and gloves and are vaccinated.

We send them home with a sack lunch and water for later after the worship service. A local donut shop provides us with goodies to pass out. Each is in a plastic bag.

We provided a worship to feed their soul, and food to feed their bodies.

We also provide some fun. **X127** This is a picture of Nate Phillips-Frey singing “Joy to the World.”

This is a picture of our blended group right after we moved. **X128**

Everyone is encouraged to participate in the service. They take up the offering, they do the peace candle, they say prayers, and they pass out the bulletins. **X129**

They give testimonies **X130** and they invite their friends to church. It has become their church too.

The blessings have been tremendous. About the time we get low on food **X131** we get a call from someone wanting to give us a generous donation. **X132 X133**

One Sunday morning someone came to church and asked for a tent and a bicycle which we didn't have. Al Mount from the Bradenton, Fl congregation pulls in that morning and the first thing out of his car was a tent. The second thing was a bicycle. **X134** God is good!

God seems to be one step ahead of us all the time seeing to the needs of the group.

During the pandemic, we delivered meals **X135** and had a drive through **X136 X137 X138** food give away.

Our congregation has transitioned from a mostly homeless congregation to a marginalized, disadvantaged, and disabled congregation. We have tried to keep our hearts and eyes open for others that were in need. It has been amazing how God has connected us with so many along the way.

We had a baptismal service on Easter Sunday in the Ocean. **X139** We baptized Bill who had been waiting for A year to be baptized. This is a current picture **X140** of our group.

We have lost eight members of our family, since the pandemic started but none were due to the pandemic!

Our first Sunday back to church was on July 4th.

We had 4 new people that attended.

Our pastor moved back to Ohio in August to be with family, so we were once again without a pastor. When Jim and Marcia Brougher **X141**, from Bradenton, heard about that, God moved them to agree to be our pastors. This has been a blessing.

On September 12th, we baptized and confirmed 4 new Members.

One Sunday a homeless member, Steve, **X142** gave a testimony he said:

“Good morning God, Angels are among us!

I came to this church with a homeless man named Jimmy. And I met loving people who I came to respect, love, and enjoy. Their concern, their love, and kindness I have never experienced.

People in this Church have made me change.

have made me see, forget hate, and make each other rise to be better, to love others, don't judge just help others, and to make a change for others to prosper.

I have been evil, hateful, and I'm not proud of my past. Because of you here today, I have made changes. I care more, I try to help not hurt. I used to hate now I try to elevate. We are equal in Jesus' name. We all have regrets and have made bad choices but through the years we change and grow. We lend a hand, a smile, words of hope, and let others know, it's not what I do, it's what Jesus

does for me and you. I still have errors, I still try to make myself better each day. This I know everyone here can help make others better. I love all of you, I respect all of you, and I love this church.”

We can't wait to see what God is going to do next!