



cake

Enjoy a slice of Hope Network!

Wednesday, November 9, 2011

Finding a way without going inside



By Tom Rademacher

Most Sundays, a group of men living at Hope Network's Hillcrest Home climb into a van and head off to a nearby drive-in.

But they're not in quest of burgers, fries and shakes.

They're in search of something far more substantive – The Word.

Thanks to Woodland Drive-In Church and its "come-as-you-are" philosophy, Hope's consumers are able to worship without entering a traditional church, an option that provides a level of comfort they might not feel sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with others.

"I remember the first time he went," Hillcrest Resident Instructor Felicia Austin said of resident Kenneth Ivy. "He didn't know much about it, but he attended, and he's been going ever since."

Kenneth smiles to remember. "That's right. I was brought up in church in Grand Rapids, but I like going to (Woodland).

"It's just very unique."

Indeed. Since its inception in 1970, some attendees at Woodland Drive-In have been known to show up in pajamas and bathrobes. Others bring their pets. Some who are uncomfortable around crowds prefer it here.



Reflecting on The Word, shown left to right, are Hillcrest Home Resident Instructor Felicia Austin, and residents Kenneth Ivy and Earl Notenbaum.

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And it can be a haven for those with chronic health issues – back problems and breathing ailments, for instance.

“We have a wide variety of people,” says the drive-in’s pastor, Rev. Verlyn Verbrugge.

“Korean, African-American, young, old. And I’m thrilled that they find the drive-in a place where they can connect with God.”

Rev. Verbrugge is especially happy to serve Hope Network and its workers and consumers. Over the years, he’s built a special relationship, and in the process, come to understand consumers’ wants and needs.

He recalls that about three years ago, he was approached by someone from Hope Network who wondered if the drive-in might reach out to the Hillcrest Home, a residence for individuals with mental illness, located just a couple hundred yards north of the drive-in’s entrance.

That Christmas, Rev. Verbrugge visited with presents in tow, including gift cards to Meijer and other area retailers. This Christmas will mark the third time Woodland intends to brighten the holiday for Hillcrest’s six male residents.

Verbrugge is the drive-in’s second pastor, coming aboard in 1984 when it was still located at the site of the former Woodland Drive-In, nearer to Woodland Shopping Center. That’s where it was founded, 41 years ago, by the Rev. Ray Rewerts, senior pastor at Fifth Reformed Church in Grand Rapids.

It moved to its present 5-acre site at 2600 Breton Avenue SE in 1988. Woodland still operates under the auspices of Fifth Reformed, but the services are non-denominational. Typical Sunday fare includes music, Scripture, preaching and prayer.

Woodland has been serving folks with special needs for decades, and not just those affiliated with Hope Network.

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A crowd of worshippers gathers in the parking lot at Woodland Drive-In Church.

Matthew 18:20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.



Rev. Verlyn Verbrugge is glad that so many Hope Network consumers are members of the Woodland congregation. As part of the church mission, he brings gifts at Christmas to those who live nearby in the Hillcrest Home.



Nearer, My God, to Thee:
Randy Claflin plays hymns of praise on the guitar.

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According to Rev. Verbrugge, Woodland has always prided itself as a worship center where anyone and everyone is welcome.

From Sunday to Sunday, any number of men and women from Hope Network might be served by Woodland Drive-In, but nobody tracks names, so it's anyone's guess.

This past Sunday, Kenneth Ivy was joined by fellow Hillcrest resident Earl Notenbaum in the van driven by Felicia Austin. Across the parking lot, Hope Network Sales Representative Jim Israels was also in attendance, accompanied by wife Laurie.

The Israels family belongs to Fifth Reformed, but for years has been alternating between the home church and the drive-in. More recently, Jim and Laurie have been attending the outdoor facility in response to a stroke Laurie suffered this past spring.

"It was difficult for me to walk around or sit long in a pew," said Laurie. "But here, I can comfortably attend church every week." Laurie has made a remarkable recovery since her stroke, which husband Jim calls "a blessing from God," adding "She's a living miracle."

Hope Network consumer Mike Terpsma used to attend the Woodland Drive-In when he lived at the Hillcrest site, but when more urgent care prompted his move to another facility, it didn't become a weekly option.

He's hoping to secure transportation again, though, and has Jana Hamming in his corner. She's a lead residential instructor at Hillcrest who still checks in on Michael from time to time.

"It was the most fantastic pleasure in all the world," Michael says of Sunday services at Woodland. "I can't begin to tell you how wonderful."

Michael especially enjoyed the song and Scripture, but also looked forward to the quarterly dinners held in the drive-in's "Greenhouse," an adjacent facility complete with kitchen, hospitality room and quarters for a "Kid's Club."



Jim Israels and wife Laurie, seated in car at last Sunday's service. Jim is a Sales Representative at Hope Network Industries

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Pulling up to the Woodland Drive-In Church:

The Woodland Drive-In Church (WDI) was founded in 1970, and patterned after what the internationally renowned evangelist Rev. Robert Schuller devised in California in 1961.

Services convene every Sunday at 11 a.m., no matter the weather. According to Rev. Verlyn Verbrugge, he's seen as few as 15 or 20 cars there on especially stormy winter days, but no Sunday has ever been reduced to a "no-show."

Each vehicle is greeted by one of some 30 volunteers who help things go. They provide a program of that day's service, and will take a prayer request if you have one. Contributing to the weekly offering is strictly optional.

Once you've parked, you tune your radio dial to 105.1 FM, a low-wattage frequency just strong enough to reach those attending.

Services tend to run less than an hour, and include music, readings from the Bible, and a message from Verbrugge. His credentials include a bachelor's degree in divinity and master's in theology from Calvin College Theological Seminary; and a doctorate in religion and theology from the University of Notre Dame. At 69, he not only pastors the drive-in, but holds a full-time job as academic and reference editor at Zondervan, a Christian book publisher based in Grand Rapids.

The drive-in's website says "We provide an alternate worship experience for those who feel more comfortable in a less formal setting."

For more information, click on driveinchurch.org, or call 942-5980 or 245-9247.



Hillcrest Home Lead Residential Instructor Jana Hamming and Hope Network Consumer Michael Terpsma, who calls Woodland Drive-In Church "the most fantastic pleasure in all the world."

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Michael largely uses a wheelchair to get around since the amputation of his left leg just below the knee – even more reason he likes to take advantage of the drive-in option.

"I can't say enough about the drive-in," says Jana. "It's perfect for some of our groups, partly because we don't have to deal with big crowds, and yet, they can still be a part of the church community."

Hillcrest resident Earl Notenbaum makes sure he prays for the important people in his life when he attends Woodland. Those include, he says, his parents, along with a brother who died at 24.

Anyone else? he's asked.

"Just Jesus."

When veteran journalist Tom Rademacher isn't writing Hope Network's weekly newsletter CAKE, he is a columnist for The Grand Rapids Press.