

7-1-2013

Behaving Beyond Your Barriers

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Recommended Citation

Pratt, M. (2013). Behaving Beyond Your Barriers. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 5(1), 117-125. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol5/iss1/11>

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Rev. Dr. Melissa Pratt

abstract

Pastoral leaders must embrace the attitude that God expects His church to grow. Effective pastors must be *future-focused* rather than *problem-focused*. They must see and personally live beyond where a church is, beyond where the barriers to growth are, and into the place God wants to take His people. Pastors must identify the behaviors of “next-level” churches to evaluate what kinds of behaviors current church leaders and members should adopt. After casting a “next-level” vision, Pastors should equip their members to behave not as they are, but as they desire to become in order to push through barriers to growth.

Each church leader has ministry challenges which can be barriers to growth. *Every church of every size has barriers.*

Proverbs 4:25 says, “Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you.” We must not become so focused on the barriers that we forget to focus on our future. Where does God want us to be as disciples and as churches on mission for Him?

In February of 2007, my husband and I were called to a church of 100 people who were hurting and tired, and they had turned inward. Just the feeling of “blah” in the life of the congregation was a barrier.

One great positive was that the church was debt free and owned seventy-four acres of property one mile from the church. On it was a picnic shelter that seated 100 and a bumpy gravel road leading to it. The church owned the property, but they were not using it. (*I wonder how many churches own or have access to resources they don't use?*)

I decided we were not going to behave like a tired church. We were going to get focused and busy. We were going to dream regardless of the fact there were not a lot of finances to spend on those dreams, and we were going to reach out to connect our community to Christ. *We were going to act "bigger" than we were* in the way we communicated, planned, and coordinated information and ministry.

We were going to find a way to do what churches of 200 were doing even though we were only 100. Churches of 200 had things going on. We had nothing going on. No Sunday School. No small groups. No choir. No special concerts. No support groups. No prayer times. No coordinated worship band or praise team. No website. No ongoing outreach. No fellowship. Those were all barriers that we decided we were going to behave beyond!

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we calendared beyond our weekly schedule

I thought, "We could appear to be a busy church even if we aren't." I wanted people to see cars in the parking lot and the lights on as often as possible. Since we did not have church leaders who were ready to hold classes and start ministries, we invited positive community groups to use our building free of charge. We let any group use our building as long as what they did did not compromise our Christian witness.

We offered Red Cross babysitting training.

We became the meeting place for three neighborhood associations.

We gave the Boy Scouts free reign of our entire facility on Monday nights.

We brought in a weight loss support group.

We offered our building to a large mental health agency that holds their state-wide trainings in our buildings.

We allowed music teachers to have their recitals in our building.

We gave a local piano teacher a key to the building to do her lessons at our church.

We gave space to a Taekwondo instructor.

We allowed a group to come in and do health screenings and another to do blood drives.

We became a polling site.

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Any way we could get people in the door on any day of the week was a way to connect people to our ministry. Our Sunday and Wednesday schedule was weak and tired, but our Monday through Saturday schedule started hopping quickly!

we organized beyond our limited structure

We had a very part-time secretary, a full-time youth pastor, and me on staff. Knowing we needed more staff in order to turn things around and realizing that we only had five participating youth at the time, I could not justify a full-time youth pastor. I had to make the difficult but necessary decision to ask him to move on. His salary was divided into three part-time positions, and we hired a visitation pastor, a couple from the church to work with the youth, and a part-time skilled worship leader.

Two years in, we needed a children's pastor but could not afford to hire one. So, we started an after school program. We hired someone to do our children's ministry part time and oversee the after school program part time. The revenue from the after school program made it possible for us to pay a full-time salary. By the fall of 2012, we recognized a need to separate the two jobs and make our children's pastor's position full time.

The volunteer leaders we had and the ones we quickly put into place were given job descriptions and were treated as unpaid staff.

We started asking questions like:

—*How did next level churches structure themselves? What boards and committees needed to be streamlined or done away with?*

—*What bylaws needed to be changed if we were going to become healthy, grow, and be led by the Holy Spirit rather than by tradition?* We moved quickly to the ratification of leaders rather than having a “beauty pageant” and “popularity contest.”

—*What kinds of changes did we need to make in worship if we were going to behave like a larger church?* Larger churches rehearsed with their bands. People did not get up and just say whatever they wanted to say before they sang a solo. Pastors did not take prayer requests from the floor on Sunday morning. Larger churches used multi-media and made presentations with a level of excellence. Larger churches offered children's church during the duration of the service.

—*What was not working that we should do away with?* Was a Sunday night service really the best use of our time and resources?

—*What spiritual diet did larger churches offer during the course of a week?* What kinds of classes should we offer, and what should our midweek services look like?

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background checks for their volunteers and had a secure check-in and check-out procedure for their children. Nursery policies were put in place, and extra measures were taken to make sure our nursery was as clean as possible.

—*How did larger churches communicate?* Email groups were established, a website was developed, and text messaging systems were put in place for various ministries to enable more effective communication. In addition, a presence was established on Facebook as we created a church group, and our members began to check in on Facebook while at our church and publicize our events on their pages.

—*What physical barriers did we need to address in order to grow?*

Because our church lobby could only hold about fifty people comfortably and we had limited children's ministry space, we did a capital campaign and completed a \$350,000.00 addition to the church.

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We resealed and restriped our parking lot to create more parking places, and we renovated office and other space to make it as useable as possible.

Growth was immediate and was a direct result of structural changes. As the church grew, we added another part-time pastor who focuses mainly on coaching our staff and leaders and helping the church strategically connect with our community.

In January of 2012, we welcomed a full-time youth pastor to our staff.

In April of 2012, we were at capacity in the sanctuary, and we went to two services.

we loved beyond relational conflict

Some division was in the church. Our people needed to believe they could enjoy serving and working together. They needed to work through relational tensions by being busy together. We painted and de-cluttered everything we could. We cleaned out a garage that was stacked floor to ceiling with junk so we could use it for a classroom. We got people up on the seventy-four acres working to bulldoze walking trails and putting in a fire pit for bonfires. Someone donated \$37,000.00 about six months after we arrived, so we re-carpeted the sanctuary and bought chairs instead of pews. Getting folks to work together took care of some lack of fellowship issues as well.

Once people saw progress, they craved more of it. The forty softball trophies that were the lobby decorations weren't then hard to get rid of. The old "cage-

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style” cribs that were in the nursery were easily let go. The broken organ that no one played was donated without a struggle. Ladies started going to yard sales to get new “equipment” for the nursery. Giving quickly increased. Electronic drums were purchased. Technology was updated, and the removing of an old, ugly, dark rail that was permanently fixed in front of the choir loft was one of the last “barriers” to go. Before long there were things to celebrate. Folks had worked together and actually enjoyed it! Within six months we were celebrating the incredible unity and friendliness of the church that remains to this day.

we thought beyond our concept of “church”

Our members knew the church was the people of God, but they had long since forgotten that the church is more than just the people; *the church is the people of God on mission.*

When we canceled Sunday night services, the first thing we did was replace them with service projects in our community. Our first project involved cleaning the playground of the elementary school located closest to our church. Located next to Dairy Queen, the school playground was littered beyond their janitor’s ability to maintain. We also gathered around the school and laid hands on the building and prayed God would help us be a blessing to that school. Different groups from our church cleaned that playground once a week for a year!

I developed a word or phrase for every year that helped our people embrace being on mission. One year was the year of the “YES!” which stood for “Year Everyone Serves.” I developed a list of fifty-two weekly assignments that each member was to attempt to fulfill in an effort to get them used to serving. Activities ranged from getting people to take their neighbors’ trash cans back up their driveways and returning other people’s carts at the local grocery, to taking snacks to waiting rooms and sending “thank you” cards to Police, Fire, and EMS persons.

The year 2012 was the “Year of Invitation.” We asked people to give us the names of people they intended to invite to church. We prayed over the names and gave our members ongoing opportunities to invite people to our events and services.

We started a host of community-focused classes, activities, and support groups including:

- Free voice lessons
- Exercise classes

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- Life camp—A week-long life skills camp for fourth through sixth graders where they learn how to sew, cook, change the oil in a car, check tire pressure, how to do power point, how to write checks and balance a check book, first aid, basic hygiene, physical fitness, and more.
- Free marriage seminars
- Drug prevention events for elementary kids and their parents
- Anti-bullying seminars
- Blanket making for police cars—When an officer removes a child from a home, a blanket can go with the child, or so that when an officer comes upon an accident and it is cold, the victim can be covered and made warm.
- Quilting classes
- Grief share
- Divorce care
- Single and parenting
- After school care
- Self-defense training
- Community carnivals and trunk or treat events held in the K-Mart parking lot rather than at our church
- Nursing home ministries in three facilities including Sunday School as well as Sunday services
- The collecting of Box Tops and Campbell's Soup Labels for local schools
- Dropping off snacks and thank you notes to teachers' lounges
- Providing refreshments at the church when people came to vote
- We clipped coupons for diapers, Pull ups, toothpaste, shampoo, cereal, and kid-friendly foods and took them to local daycares and preschools for parents to pick up when they get their children.
- We started a monthly preschool play date for preschool moms and their kids.
- We put in sand volleyball courts on our seventy-four acres and ran leagues five months out of the year that target the community. When we started, the rule was: church members could only register to play if they brought an un-churched person to the team as well.
- We cut over two miles of walking and riding trails for people to ride horses and ATVS and hike on our property.
- We put water, electric, and a restroom building near the picnic shelter so groups use the seventy-four acres as a community park seven days a week.
- We hosted a fireworks extravaganza on the seventy-four acres.
- We launched an addiction recovery ministry in 2013.

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- We created a “break room” for local police officers, open from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. every weekday, complete with coffee and snacks.
- We scheduled outreaches regularly to keep our people busy serving. Those outreaches ranged from handing out water bottles and throwing block parties, to holding beauty makeovers for single moms and providing people at the local Laundromat with quarters.

i have behaved beyond my title of pastor and became a community leader

I went to our church with the mindset that I was not just going to be just the church’s pastor, but I was going to be the pastor of Putnam County, West Virginia. I joined the Rotary, not because I needed something else to do or a place to eat lunch on Tuesdays, but I needed to connect with community leaders, business persons, and those on our school boards and in our local politics. As a result of that strategic partnership, I have become a “chaplain” to the people of Putnam County on many occasions. I have:

- Held funeral services for families of my Rotary colleagues
- Sung for bridge ribbon cuttings and Race for the Cure fundraisers
- Prayed at a veteran’s event
- Played piano dinner music at community gatherings
- Participated in parades
- Spoken for community-wide Thanksgiving events
- Been part of dedications at hospitals and schools
- Seen five Rotary families start attending our church
- Received money from the Rotary for our after school program
- Hosted Rotary professionals as guest speakers at our life camp
- Worked with the Rotary to obtain a grant for further development of our property

I volunteer during the course of the year as a chaplain at our local hospital as another way to be involved in the community.

Four high schools are in our county, and since I am a musician, I have made myself available to the local music teachers. As a result, I have worked with three different show choirs as a guest clinician.

I write and send six press releases a month to our local media and get a lot of free press.

I have friended every community leader possible on Facebook for the purpose of seeing when they post something that I can pray about. It gives me a reason to reach out to them in support.

As the leader of a growing church, I have to be praying, dreaming about, and planning for the future. I have to already be in a position of faith in the place where I believe our congregation is headed. We will be relocating to the seventy-four acres, but we will not be building another sanctuary. We will build a multi-purpose community center in which our church will worship. We will do ministry seven days a week by offering programs that meet the spiritual, financial, social, physical, and emotional needs of people in our community.

We do not have the three million dollars it will take to build the community center, but I have had to lead as if we do. We paved the gravel road, making it easier and more desirable for people to come up the hill to the property. We had a naming contest with our congregation and chose the name “Teays Valley Acres.” “Acres” stands for “All can receive eternal salvation!” We had a sign made that says the property is a park and community service of our church and that it is opened daily from dawn to dusk. We put in a playground that is used all of the time. As we have had extra money, we put it into property development.

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In 2010, we developed a master plan. In the fall of 2012, we had a prayer walk on the Acres. After hiking and strategically praying with people from our church, we had a “spiritual groundbreaking” and buried scriptures on the site where the community center would go. We hired engineers to draw up the engineering plans to tell us what site prep was going to cost.

Everything we did was about moving forward in faith and was all bathed in prayer. If my time was not spent working on the future in some measure every week, the demands of my weekly schedule would have become the biggest barrier of all.

By the fall of 2012, we were averaging 375 in worship and had celebrated 137 first-time conversions. Twenty lay leaders were trained to assist with the pastoral care load of the larger church. With more people came more needs, more problems, more barriers, and therefore, the more need for change, strategy, and the empowering of others to serve.

A capital campaign was planned for the spring of 2013 to help us move towards building.

We chose to behave beyond our challenges. We chose to behave as if we believed God intended for us to grow and expected us to reach out to our community. We structured the ministry so that the Holy Spirit could lead and people could use the gifts God had given them to serve and love others as an expression of God’s love. Behave not as you are but as you want to become. By

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God's grace, He will enable your church to become the transforming agent in your community God desires for it to be!

Rev. Dr. Melissa Pratt is the Senior Pastor of the Teays Valley Church of God, a fast-growing church, in Scott Depot, West Virginia. Formerly, she served for 12 years as the Assistant Pastor of the Dayspring Church of God in Cincinnati, OH and as a missionary for two years on the island of Cyprus. Dr. Pratt holds degrees from Anderson University, Asbury Theological Seminary, and the Institute for Worship Studies. In addition to her pastoral work, she has been an online instructor, conference and retreat speaker, evangelist, worship coach and voice clinician and is a member of Rotary International.