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## A New Table at the Block Party

OK, it's not the most sophisticated form of evangelism, but having a table at our church's annual block party, where people are invited to talk with us about Jesus Christ, has led to some fabulous conversations which never would otherwise have happened.

Almost ten years ago, our church, College Hill Presbyterian, on the main street of an urban neighborhood of Cincinnati, started having a block party where free food and family entertainment were offered. It was part of our effort to move from being a church that was perceived by some as off-limits to the neighborhood, to being a church that is welcoming to all.

Three years ago, some of us wanted to create a space where people would feel free to have conversations about faith while they were at the block party. So we made two big signs that said: Free Coke if you Talk with us about Jesus for Three Minutes. We filled coolers with drinks, set up chairs, prayed, and waited to see what would happen.

## Personal Encounters

The results were delightful. People of all ages came and eagerly talked of their faith, their doubts, their grievances with the church, their needs for prayer, their testimonies of the goodness of God. Intense, personal conversations about spiritual things, which so rarely flow for most of us in the routine of our lives, flourished in a setting that simply gave permission.

### **Encounters I will never forget:**

- The skeptical girl in her young teens who wanted to know how she could know that God is really there.
- The boy, around 10, who told one of our high school volunteers that his mother had just died the week before. It was precious to see the older boy praying for strength and comfort for the younger boy.

- The young woman in her 20s who wanted to stand strong in her faith and realized that this meant she was going to have to distance from some destructive friends. She accepted our prayers with hugs of gratitude.
- The thoughtful Muslim man who wanted to understand better why we believed that Christ was God. (Luckily one of our volunteers that night was a professor of theology! They talked a lot longer than three minutes.)
- The older lady who had drifted away from church attendance and had just received a diagnosis of cancer. She felt terribly isolated, and soaked in our prayers and encouragement to return to her community of faith.

## Trained Listeners

The first year we did this, we just chose a few volunteers who were good listeners and comfortable about verbally sharing their faith. Since then, we have firmed up the process to include a short training on the essential elements of the gospel and how to share this in their own words, and on how to pray with people if that is their desire. We emphasize the need to be a good listener, to avoid debate over beliefs, and to be ready to welcome people to our church, or to tell them about any of its ministries which could help them, including a class for those who want to further explore following Christ. If Christians have caused any pain to them in the past, we apologize.

One of the best features of our table is that we have an equal number of high school students and adult volunteers; six of each, working four at a time over three nights. It is such a joy to do this kind of intergenerational ministry.

## Conclusion

Our neighborhood is less than prosperous these days, so naturally, many who come to the table are more motivated by the desire for a free pop than by any spiritual yearning. (We give away free water with the hamburgers and hot dogs at the block party, but our table is the only place to get a coke.) This works out well too, because many people who only came for the drink end up leaving with a smile, hopefully feeling more connected and cared for than if we had not been there.

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