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Oviedo church undertakes 'epic' task to reach youth

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An e-Review Feature
By Steven Skelley**

Churches of all sizes and shapes make it a priority to reach out to children and youth in their communities. This story is the third of three focusing on churches reaching out in their own unique ways to the young people around them. The first two stories are "Palatka church teaches kids keys to succeed" at <http://www.flumc.info/cgi-script/csArticles/articles/000030/003037.htm> and "Acts of vandalism become catalyst for reaching teens" at <http://www.flumc.info/cgi-script/csArticles/articles/000030/003092.htm>.

Paul Dabdoub says it's a big step for kids to walk into a church, so he and his team of volunteers are doing all they can to make it easier for them.

If Mallory's experience is any indication, their efforts seem to be working.

Mallory said her first Sunday evening at University Carillon United Methodist Church's EPIC Teen Community ministry was the first time she'd ever been to church and she was surprised it was a "church kinda thing."

"I just want to thank you for making the first time I ever walked into church actually meaningful," she said.

"Tonight I said that salvation prayer. It's the first time I've ever prayed or talked to God or any of that, so thanks."

Since the church opened EPICenter, a 15,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art facility where the youth ministry meets, just after Easter 2006, more than 2,000 young adults and youth from 60 area middle and high schools have visited, according to Dabdoub, who leads the church's youth ministry. Eighty percent were unchurched. He said 350 youth attend each Sunday's EPIC gathering and nearly 200 have "given their lives to Christ."

Those results seem to be making a dent in the latest odds. Statistics show only about 4 percent of people less than 24 years old go to church, according to Dabdoub. University Carillon United Methodist Church is in Oviedo, a city where 43 percent of its residents belong to that age group.

"In the Baby Boomer generation, 35 percent say they are Christians. In this



The game room at University Carillon United Methodist Church's EPICenter has everything from pool tables to rock climbing walls for youth and young adults as part of the church's outreach to that demographic. Photo courtesy of University Carillon United Methodist Church. Photo #07-0540.

current generation of kids, only 4 percent are Christians," Dabdoub said. "We lose three out of every four kids in church before they reach adulthood. We need to fix this right now or we're in trouble in the church."

One of the ministry's draws is EPICenter itself, which can accommodate more than 500 people. Inside the building are rock climbing walls, XBOX and PlayStation 2 electronic game players, LCD TVs, a café, a water bar, a high school lounge, and pool tables. Every week there's live music and a disk jockey.

The ministry also has a My Space page at <http://www.MySpace.com/EpicPlace> and a Web site for kids who have left church because they were bored by it or don't understand it. The site's address is <http://www.boredonsunday.com>.

"I am trying to reach them in their environment and where they are," Dabdoub said. "I will not do a bait-and-switch on them. You don't need a facility like this, but we do need to rethink the way we do the things we do. Too many times the church has confused culture with the 'world.' Worldly means something is wrong with the values. There are a lot of things in culture that we can use to reach kids."

Some of the things done at EPICenter have shocked people, according to Dabdoub. "We play secular music in the background because that's what these kids are familiar with. We bring in local secular bands. It's a big part of what we do," he said. "One band came back to the church to attend a service after playing here. We reached out to them, and they came back."



Youth register to attend a weekly Sunday evening gathering of EPIC Teen Community, the youth ministry at University Carillon United Methodist Church. Photo courtesy of University Carillon United Methodist Church. Photo #07-0541.

Dabdoub says one roadblock to youth participating in the church is the language — it has become "way too churchy." "We've become irrelevant. We just need to be relevant to kids," he said. "We became very deliberate and intentional about reaching the unchurched. There has to be sincerity in our hearts, and we have to rethink Christianity and church if we're to reach this culture. We've lost the means of being able to communicate in culture because we've gotten stuck inside our four church walls."

Because of the number of youth statistics say churches don't reach, Dabdoub said the church is at a crossroads. "I want to be riding the wave, not sandbagging the church," he said. "I want kids to have a real spiritual life and affect changes wherever they are. I want to prepare kids to start thinking missionally."

Service is a big part of what we do because we're preparing the next generation of the church."

The ministry is led by nearly 180 adult and 40 student volunteers. College students, called disciples, volunteer to come and "hang out" with the youth. Every leader and volunteer must complete a background check before beginning.

The Rev. Joe MacLaren, senior pastor of the church, said he was inspired to reach out to youth and young adults after visiting a church in Indiana.

"I visited Union Chapel United Methodist Church in Muncie, Ind., and witnessed something I didn't think was possible," he said. "There were 600 teens in attendance at youth group. Most of them came from unchurched families. There was a designated place for kids to hang out, and over time they can be exposed to the truth of Jesus' claims. I knew if I ever got to a church where I could have this kind of youth group, I would make it happen."

MacLaren's dream has become a reality, and the building is rapidly reaching capacity. MacLaren hopes the church will be able to open the building two nights a week — one night for middle school youth and the other for senior high students.

"We are also providing and encourage discipleship opportunities for those who are moving beyond the 'big nights' and seeking to align their lives with Christ," MacLaren said.

On a recent Sunday night at EPIC, a few of the youth shared how they feel about the ministry.

"Epic is worth it," Callie said. "You gotta try the stage diving." Steven agreed, saying: "Oh snap! Don't think twice. Go." And according to Barry, it's two hours of "life-changing, amazing goodness and the time flies." His recommendation? "Do it."

Dabdoub is encouraged, but cautious about the response so far. "I've learned that we can declare victory too soon," he said. "I'm excited about where we are, but I know God's heart breaks for the thousands of kids in our area who don't have a relationship with Him. We haven't seen those faces yet. If we are obedient and humble, God could send those kids through our doors. That would be awesome."

Dabdoub says he and the ministry's volunteers are making a very deliberate attempt to cross the board and be authentic Christians, to be real disciples. "If they feel God's love, they'll have an internal change."

University Carillon United Methodist Church's Web site is <http://www.ucumc.net>. The site for the EPIC ministry is <http://www.epicplace.com/>. The church can be contacted by e-mail at contact@ucumc.net or by phone at 407-359-2112.

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This article relates to Outreach and Youth Ministry.

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