

How did the experience impact White Bluff's member's faith journeys?

White Bluff was facing a situation similar to many churches after the Covid-19 shutdown. Decreasing attendance, decreasing giving, increasing cost of building maintenance, searching for a permanent pastor had led to a "change or die" diagnosis. There might not have been a droop in faith in God, but there certainly was a feeling of gloom and doom settling over many of the members, but all were not ready to give up yet.

When Rev. Dr. John Ruehl became the transitional pastor, he put forth some new ideas. There was a large campus with unused space and bills that were the same as when the space was full. White Bluff had rented some of the space before, but the new pastor felt that the rentals should be purposeful and the renters should align with the White Bluff mission vision.

This alignment was perfect when Asbury UMC needed a place to meet. They planted their church on WBPC campus around the same time Family Promise needed a different way of operating due to COVID - 19 impacts, and Inspiritus was looking for space. There were others that had proposed renting space from WBPC, but unless the mission was similar to WBPC, those proposals were not accepted.

The ReKindle grant provided funds for activities and events that were meant to bring all the groups together to interface and carry out common missions. There was an excitement among congregants from both churches, a sense of camaraderie formed and friendships blossomed.

There was an intentional effort for the two churches to worship side by side and sometimes together without changing the worship practices of either. WBPC was not attempting to incorporate Asbury UMC into their congregation, nor Asbury trying to change White Bluff into a Methodist church. There was mutual respect and appreciation for each church and the differences in worship while realizing the sameness of worshipping the same living God.

Both congregations grew in number and in enthusiasm. Members began to see that through deliberate attention to the mission of God's churches, changes could be accomplished in ways that would not destroy the essence of the church. Rather than brooding over losing the church, there was rejoicing in new ways to rejuvenate the church. One of the elders began asking the congregation each week, "Where have you seen God at work this week?" Answers were diverse and full of hope and joy.

How does continued partnerships with Family Promise and Inspiritus impact WBPC?

Through the rekindle grant a closer sense of community with Inspiritus and Family Promise began to develop. The groundwork was set, but more work needed to be done. After the grant ended, the church - particularly the Presbyterian Women of White Bluff continued to explore ways to grow those relationships.

In December 2023, WBPW treated seven Family Promise families to a Pajama Party themed Christmas party. Churches throughout Savannah donated gifts for Santa to deliver to the children; Pastor John and

others cooked pancakes, bacon, sausage, green and red pots of grits, scrambled eggs, and other breakfast items. The congregation made financial donations so that each family could also receive \$100 gift cards to help with other Christmas expenses. The children met Santa and Mrs. Claus, watched a Christmas movie in Pajamas after “breakfast for dinner.” This led to an excitement to do the same thing for Christmas 2024. The theme for this year was a Winter Wonderland. Thirty-nine families were able to shop for gifts with vouchers provided by giving churches. At the same time 96 children enjoyed a Christmas party with food, games and gifts.

Meantime WBPW learned that one of the Inspiritus case workers had 6 clients that were expecting babies. The White Bluff women went to work collecting baby gifts and planning an old-fashioned South Georgia baby shower for the 6 women. Two were unable to attend, but gifts were delivered to their homes. Out of the four who attended, three became regular attendees with their children to Sunday worship at White Bluff. So, the number grew from 2 (the pastor’s son and daughter) to 8 or 9 on most Sundays. The ladies quickly developed a children’s church where all are learning about Jesus and His love and the African children are learning some English.

In the Spring, White Bluff PW will be partnering with Family Promise to start Reading Clubs for the children ages 3-10. I think having children in worship and on the church property always has an impact on almost all other areas of church life.

What lessons have been learned?

White Bluff was faced with a situation that seemed impossible. The message was clear that the church could not continue to survive without some major changes. But God’s message was a little different- With God all things are possible if the right vision is put into place. The old saying, “think outside the box” was adjusted a little to be “think about what goes in the box”. By being deliberate about renting space to organizations that have a shared vision of reaching out to God’s people and providing the love of Jesus to those who need it most, much can be accomplished.

There were growing pains in the beginning. When the buildings are used daily rather than on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, there is a slightly different kind of maintenance that becomes necessary. Those things are being worked out in various ways, using resources we have and the generosity of members and neighbors.

Following Helene and the damage left behind, the church was opened up as a charging station and day shelter. People in the neighborhoods without electricity and internet service were encouraged to come in and heat up meals in the microwave, charge batteries, use the internet for important business and work details. Lesson: there are lots of ways to be a good neighbor and helping those in various stages of need shows God’s love and what the church is all about.

Additionally, Neighbors feeding neighbors has set up a distribution site in White Bluff PC. This is just another way God’s love can be seen through providing for the physical needs of the neighborhoods.

Have there been cultural shifts?

Having a predominately black Methodist church worship along side and sometimes together with a predominantly white Presbyterian church did cause some cultural shifts. Some racial barriers were challenged and changed, some denominational differences were understood and embraced. Sharing space with other Christians caused a bit of a shift in what's really important. The selfish protection of sacred space was put into perspective as the "rights" of both congregations were considered equally important.

Conversations about homeless people might have shifted from, "how can we keep the homeless men from sleeping in the churchyard?" to, "How can we partner with Family Promise to move people from homelessness to temporary or permanent homes?" And, "How can we assist these families while still treating them with the dignity all God's children deserve?"

With the negative publicity and political scene surrounding Immigrants, it is promising to see refugees and immigrants being cared for by the Inspiritus organization and to see the refugee families who choose to worship at White Bluff be embraced as members of the family – God's family. Perhaps there has been a cultural shift as these families are seen as people who are searching for a new life where they can protect their children from the atrocities of wars and educate them and worship with them in safety.