

Select Page



Parking Lot Service Brings Conway Community Together

Grace UMC holds weekly worship service outside the church's walls

Jul 1, 2020 | Arkansas United Methodist



By Caleb Hennington

Digital Content Editor



As the Arkansas Conference moves into Stage 2 of the COVID-19 reopening plan, many churches have chosen to remain physically distanced and continue online services to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

One church that has found success not just online, but in a modified in-person worship experience, is Grace United Methodist Church in Conway, Arkansas.

Grace UMC's senior pastor the Rev. Herschel Richardson said that his church's Parking Lot Service has seen widespread acceptance and success, not just from his congregation but from the community of Conway as well.

"At one of our staff meetings, I shared that I thought it would be a great opportunity if we moved outside for our service. Because it would help our congregation meet the need of having a more visual type of worship service outside of online worship," Richardson said.

Richardson said they were doing online worship before COVID-19 and were getting a great response to that, but they wanted to expand their worship opportunities for people and meet them where they are.



A group of youth volunteers passes out water bottles to people attending the parking lot service. Photo by Grace UMC.

Every Sunday, a team of volunteers, including many of the youth who attend Grace, set up the parking lot for the worship service. Richardson said that a lot of the setup is led by younger people who know the technical aspect of getting the service online, as well as running cables for the microphones and speakers needed to broadcast the service loud enough for everyone to hear.

People who want to attend the parking lot service can drive up in their cars and pick a spot close to the stage. The service operates in much the same way as one inside the church, with worship, a time of prayer, and a message.

Richardson said many people choose to stay in their car with the windows rolled down, but some choose to bring lawn chairs and socially distance themselves in the parking lot.

“We’ve also had some people get really creative and set up their lawn chairs in the back of a truck or open their hatchback on their SUV and just sit in the back of their car. We’ve had a great response so far and have had pretty much a full parking lot every Sunday,” Richardson said.

Volunteers also wear masks and gloves, and pass out water bottles as people arrive to the parking lot as well.

Setup for the 9 a.m. service begins at 5 a.m. and volunteers also spend a few hours after the service is over tearing everything down again. Because of the location of the service, every element, from the microphones, monitors and instruments, to the stage itself, a flatbed trailer loaned to the church by a local business, must be set up and taken back down each Sunday.



A man enjoys the Parking Lot Service at Grace from the comfort of his truck bed.
Photo by Grace UMC.

They’ve also been able to attract many people in the community who are riding their bikes or walking by the church parking lot. Richardson said they’ve even had people dancing and clapping to the worship music as they walk by the church.

“Some of our neighbors across the street have come outside their homes with lawn chairs and listened to our service in their yards, and we also had people at the nursing home nearby set up chairs in their parking lot to listen.”

Richardson said they’ve even had new people get connected to the church, and he was surprised one Sunday when he told a family about their virtual bulletin and how to get more information about Grace.

“They said ‘oh no, we already have it. We’re connected!’ and that’s a new family that had never been to church before,” Richardson said.

The flatbed trailer that Grace uses as a stage has been one of the key aspects of making the set up for the service run smoother, Richardson said.

Don Mallory, owner of Mallory Construction Inc. located across the street from Grace, said that he loans his flatbed trailer to Grace every Sunday.

Mallory said his wife used to attend Grace under the Rev. Bob Crossman, and as someone who loves to help others out whenever he can, he wanted to find a way to help the church.

“Well, I just think it’s for the Kingdom and the glory of God. I don’t mind helping out and feel like that’s what I should do,” Mallory said.

Richardson also said that although they were doing online worship services before, they had not used Facebook Live before the coronavirus, and since moving to their parking lot service, they have added that option for people as well.

Grace has been holding their Parking Lot Service for about five weeks, and Richardson said they plan on continuing to have it as long as people want it.

“It’s just been a blessing to our church to be able to worship with our community in a new way and we’re just really thankful and prayerful for the new way that God has helped us to engage in the mission of reaching people and making disciples.”

Share this:

 Facebook
 Twitter
 LinkedIn
 Print
 Email