

CASE STUDY

*To Fence Off
or to Feed?*

**Morning Star United
Methodist Church's
After-School
Snack Ministry**

TO FENCE OFF OR TO FEED?

Written by Lillian Lammers



Aerial view of Morning Star UMC in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Introduction

When a church in Las Cruces, New Mexico, shared a property line with a middle school, the congregation faced a question: Do the youth spilling into their parking lot every afternoon represent a problem or a possibility?

PART 1

The Context

Morning Star United Methodist Church (UMC) is a medium-sized congregation in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a vibrant city located approximately 40 miles away from the U.S.-Mexico border. Las Cruces is the second most populous city in the state and is known for its scenic mountains, 350+ days of sunshine, and rich, multicultural heritage. With a growing population of more than 110,000, residents are drawn to the city because of its affordability, outdoor activities, award-winning farmers market and festivals, and educational opportunities at New Mexico State University.

Morning Star UMC was founded in 1987, and since its founding has been dedicated to ministries of service to the community. The identity of a missional church serving the community is one that has long been primary for this congregation. The church operates one of the largest food pantries in the city, and many who are drawn to membership in the congregation find a home there because of the church's deep commitments to helping neighbors who are struggling.

With just under 500 members, Morning Star UMC has an average weekly attendance of more than 300. However, about half of their attendance has shifted to online since 2018, so in their most recent

MORNING STAR UMC

144

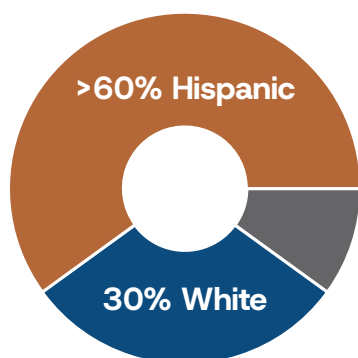
AVERAGE IN-PERSON
ATTENDANCE

10%

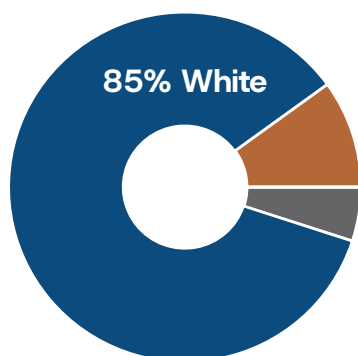
MEMBERSHIP GROWTH
IN PAST 5 YEARS

reporting, in-person attendance was an average of 144. Despite national trends of decline in the United Methodist Church, Morning Star has seen steady growth in membership, increasing their roster by approximately 10% over the last five years. Although the demographics of the residents in the city of Las Cruces are more than 60% Hispanic and only 30% White, the congregation at Morning Star UMC is more than 85% White. Despite growth in recent years, the church — like many mainline Protestant churches — continues to have a disproportionately small number of youth in its membership and attendance.¹

AREA RESIDENTS



CONGREGATION



The Rev. Amy Wilson Feltz was called to the role of pastor at the church in 2021 as the first female to lead this congregation. Feltz is described by members as open, energetic and inclusive in her leadership. One parishioner described her as a “gardener” who plants seeds of ideas and then allows the lay leadership in the church to cultivate those ideas and foster their growth. The church members also note that while she has many innovative ideas herself, she is also open to receiving and supporting ideas from anyone in the church community. One of the church’s most popular programs, Food Truck Fridays, came from a lay member of the congregation. Under Feltz’s leadership, the church has more than doubled the number of community ministries of justice, outreach and mercy. At the same time, there has been about a 30% increase in the number of members participating in one or more of these ministries², further solidifying service to the community as a core identity marker for the congregation.

¹ www.umdata.org/church?church=836610

² www.umdata.org/church?church=836610

Questions for Reflection

1. What stands out to you about Morning Star UMC's context?
Where do you see the story of your congregation or organization in that context?
2. What do you find encouraging or inspiring about Morning Star UMC that gives you renewed energy for your work?
3. What challenges do you anticipate for this church? How might your experience inform how you would address them?
4. Where do you see possibilities and opportunities for this church?

PART 2

The Challenge

Several years ago, Morning Star UMC faced a weekday challenge: Students from the neighboring middle school would flood their parking lot at the end of the school day as they awaited pickup from their family members and guardians. Morning Star UMC shares a property line with Camino Real Middle School, and the two are connected by a flight of stairs. Rather than navigate the carpool lines in front of the school, the church parking lot had become a popular spot for students to be dropped off in the morning and picked up at the end of the day.



The shared flight of stairs is a popular spot for pick up and drop off.

At the end of the school day, many students would have to wait around for their ride to pick them up, leaving them unsupervised on the church property for an extended period in the afternoons. There were a couple of incidents of minor vandalism, and some of the church members began to raise the alarm about the

damage, lack of traffic control, and potential liability of unsupervised youth on the church property. Many members were concerned and annoyed. Some even raised the idea of closing off the school's access to the church parking lot and property as a solution.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are the primary concerns for members at Morning Star UMC in this situation with middle school youth in their parking lot?
2. What are possible solutions to members' concerns?
3. How might these solutions engage both members and students in ways that affirm Morning Star UMC's commitment to be a missional church?

PART 3

A New Ministry Is Born

As the issue of the unsupervised youth in the parking lot began to mount, Feltz, the new pastor, viewed this problem as a new opportunity. She was simultaneously hearing members complain about the youth in the parking lot while also hearing complaints about the overall lack of youth in the congregation. Feltz asked a simple question: “What if we open the doors and invite these young people in?”

She nudged the congregation to consider what hospitality and relationship-building would look like with those youth who were already setting foot on their property every school day. Reminding the congregation that they were often making comments about needing more young people in the church, she suggested that perhaps rather than “looking out” to try to find their next mission opportunity and means of connecting with youth and families, they merely needed to “look up” at the students right outside their doors. Feltz met with the leadership at the middle school to work through the logistics of beginning a ministry in partnership with the school.

The idea was initially met with questions, and even some resistance, from a few members of the congregation. One member who was a retired teacher stated she would not participate unless the ministry had a more directed purpose, like helping the youth with homework. Others were worried about the

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liability of hosting such a program. But one member, Ann, stepped forward and took a lead role in piloting the ministry, initially volunteering every day of the week. She had experience running similar programs and helped to secure a \$10,000 grant from the New Mexico Conference of the United Methodist Church to help initially fund a snack ministry.

With some initial hesitancy, the congregation launched an after-school snack program, staffed primarily by church volunteers, many of them retirees who could be present at the church in the afternoons. The ministry includes greeting students and providing them with snacks, access to Wi-Fi and restrooms. The program began with about 45 students participating each afternoon, and over the years has grown to more than 200 students daily. Several students started attending the church youth group activities on Wednesday evenings. Some of the parents of the students participating in the snack ministry have developed closer ties with Morning Star UMC, and some have even chosen to become members.

But one of the most significant benefits of the new ministry has been the relationships developed between the volunteers and middle school youth. Church members report how meaningful and impactful these cross-generational relationships have been. Sometimes the students want to talk about the events and challenges of their lives with the volunteers, and the volunteers report that students began to open up more as their relationships with

them grew. The congregation was lacking the kinds of cross-generational relationships and conversations that have emerged from this ministry. They have come to learn that they were hungry for these kinds of encounters, which have become increasingly rare as third spaces (places other than work/school and home) have decreased over the last decade in the United States.

The snack ministry has also developed a partnership between the church and Camino Real Middle School. Church staff and the middle school administration have regular communication about programs and are able to work together when the church becomes aware of any problems or concerns with the students who visit the church after school. The congregation has also started supporting the annual “12 Days of Christmas” staff appreciation program at the school. Reciprocally, the school hosts an annual Empty Bowls Silent Auction, with the proceeds going to support the food pantry at Morning Star UMC. The church members attend the fundraiser and ensure that every bowl created by a student gets purchased at the auction.

The birth of the snack ministry at Morning Star UMC also led Feltz and the congregation to think differently about the involvement of youth in the church. Both members and Feltz herself had noted that their offerings for youth had often felt siloed-off from the rest of the congregational activities. With the support of the church leadership, Feltz made the decision to bring youth back into the

sanctuary for worship on Sunday mornings, rather than have them attend Sunday School in a different part of the building. She will often create worksheets for the youth and children to engage with during Sunday worship and will even reference items on the worksheets in her sermons. Feltz reports how having youth more physically present in the largest church gathering each week has changed the feeling of worship and has brought new joy to the services.



Crosses stand on a hill beside Morningstar UMC.

One of the core identities of the congregation has been to serve the community in Las Cruces by demonstrating love and welcome that mirror the ways of Jesus Christ, reflects Feltz. That means looking for those with a need and stepping forward to offer aid. Feltz reports that while many in Las Cruces may not immediately recognize the name of the church, once they know the location,

community members are quick to identify the church as the one that works with the middle school, or the one that has the food pantry, or the one that hosts free weddings on Valentine's Day, or the one with the food truck night. Church members claim there is no greater accomplishment than for the church to be known in the community by ministries it operates.

Questions for Reflection

1. The members at Morning Star UMC initially viewed the students and families at Camino Real Middle School using their property for drop-off and pick-up as a problem. What does this perspective communicate about the initial mindset of the congregation or the assumptions they held?

2. Feltz was able to change the conversation with a question: “What if we open the doors and invite these young people in?”
a. What are the theological implications behind this question?

What were the shifts in mindset that resulted from this question?

3. What are the benefits for Morning Star UMC and the community that stemmed from this new ministry and from the partnership between the church and the middle school?

4. The snack ministry at Morning Star UMC has led to broader creative thinking about the role of youth in the congregation.

What might be some possibilities for developing cross-generational engagement and relationships in your context?

What assumptions or mindset shifts does your congregation need to address to make this possible?

5. One of the congregants described Feltz's leadership style as being like a gardener, planting seeds of ideas and allowing the congregation to handle cultivation and growth.

What are the advantages to this leadership style?

What are the challenges that might arise from this leadership style, and how might those be navigated?

How would you describe the leadership style in your context and how might it be inspired by Feltz?

6. Over a short time, the snack ministry grew from 45 students to more than 200 most days of the week.

What does this growth suggest about the program?

How might this ministry and its growth inform how future ministry opportunities are developed?

7. Churches usually measure their health and success by three primary metrics: membership, attendance and revenue streams. The snack ministry did not have an immediate and direct impact on these three particular metrics, but it is still viewed by the church as a successful and valuable program.

What determines if a ministry is successful in your context?

Do you believe that Morning Star UMC's ministry is worthwhile and successful? Why or why not?

VIDEO

In Their Own Words



Video by Big Dog Little Bed

[>> View the video for the Morning Star UMC Snack Ministry](https://duke.is/snack-ministry)

<https://duke.is/snack-ministry>

PART 4

Reflection and Connection

The members at Morning Star UMC thought they had a problem in that unsupervised youth were loitering on their church property, causing damage and creating a liability as they waited for rides home after school. Feltz changed the conversation by asking a simple question: “What if we open the doors and invite these young people in?” From that question, an idea was born to welcome, feed and get to know the middle school students. From that idea, a vibrant ministry has developed that has led to an after-school program where students are able to go inside the church, have a snack, and access Wi-Fi, restrooms and adults willing to talk with them about their day. The students now have a place to wait for their rides home — and they see the church as a place of safety and welcome.

The congregation has likewise been transformed through the snack ministry and the relationships this program has fostered. At Feltz’s continued nudging, the church has rethought how they incorporate youth in worship and they no longer have the children absent from the sanctuary during the Sunday morning services. Rather, youth have a worksheet they can use that connects to the sermon message, and Feltz will often tie in lessons from the packet when speaking to the congregation in worship. The implementation of the ministry serving students at Camino Real Middle School has changed the way the church thinks about young people: a population that members long stated was absent from their worshipping community.

Questions for Reflection

1. Feltz noted that in looking for its next ministry opportunity, “the congregation didn’t need to look out, it only needed to look up and see who was right at our doorstep.”

Why might congregations be more inclined to “look out” when seeking ministry opportunities?

When considering your context, what might you see as a ministry opportunity if you simply “look up” at who and what is at your doorstep?

- 2.** All organizations have a mission, vision and/or purpose that offers guiding principles for their operations. The congregation at Morning Star UMC understands their “missional DNA” as a church that has been rooted in serving the needs of the community. Identifying this DNA allowed them to view their relationship with Camino Real Middle School differently and to develop a new ministry as a result. What is the mission of your congregation or organization, and how does it inform how you serve the needs of your community?

3. Most churches are eager for new opportunities to connect with young people, and yet we do not often see new ministries, like this snack ministry, directed at building relationships with them. Why do you think that might be?

What unexplored opportunities or possibilities exist for your organization to build relationships with youth?

4. How does your congregation or organization define innovation? How are decisions around innovation usually made in your context?

5. When considering the Morning Star UMC snack ministry, what are the leadership and organizational dynamics you see that led to its success? How might this inform or inspire your congregation or organization?

6. Most of the youth and families served by this ministry have not become regular attendees or members at Morning Star UMC. Does this reality shape or influence the success of the ministry? Why or why not?

Learning and Exploration Goals

- How has this case study for the Morning Star UMC snack ministry led you to think differently or more deeply about the following:
 - Pastoral leadership?
 - Congregational or organizational openness to new programs?
 - Congregational or organizational assumptions and mindsets?
 - The catalyst for new programs and/or ministries?
 - Metrics for a successful program?
- What questions did the case study raise for you when considering your congregational or organizational context? How might you commit to exploring those questions with others?
- Using the Morning Star UMC lesson of “the congregation didn’t need to look out, it only needed to look up and see who was right at our doorstep,” how might you brainstorm with your congregational or organizational leadership to identify the opportunities at your doorstep?
- What are some funding sources that might exist to support your congregation or organization’s new ministry opportunity?

For Further Exploration

Below are resources for further reading and listening related to concepts discussed in this case study.

Books

Susan Beaumont's *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*

Peter Block's *Community: The Structure of Belonging*

Walter Brueggemann's *Living Towards a Vision*

Adam Grant's *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*

David E. Kresta's *Jesus on Main Street: Good News Through Community Economic Development*

Kavin Rowe's *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope*

Audrey Warren and Kevin H. Carter Jr.'s *Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church for People Not in Church*

Audrey Warren and Kevin H. Carter Jr.'s *Fresh Expressions of People Over Poverty*

Don Everts' *The Hopeful Neighborhood: What Happens When Christians Pursue the Common Good*

Podcasts

[Listen, Organize, Act](https://divinity.duke.edu/media/listen-organize-act-podcast) – Duke Divinity School

<https://divinity.duke.edu/media/listen-organize-act-podcast>

[Leading Ideas Talks](https://www.churchleadership.com/series/leading-ideas-talks/) – Lewis Center for Church Leadership

<https://www.churchleadership.com/series/leading-ideas-talks/>