

***Faith: Churches use Easter as opportunity to reach out
Many plan special events to connect with sporadic visitors
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Holy Week is upon us. For some people, it's time to open the closet and pull out that nice suit or Sunday dress, or to head to the mall for something new because they've only got a few days until their yearly visit to church.

"As a general rule, our attendance is up a little more on Easter Sunday," said Fred Mayberry, a minister with Fairview Church of Christ.

But where some see overcrowding, others see opportunity. The Easter season is a time when local churches try to entice some of these occasional visitors to become regulars on Sundays.

"Unfortunately, people have been turned off by church because of the perception that churchgoers are self-righteous. Or because they do not get their questions answered. Or because at a mega-church, for example, they fail to connect to other people," said the Rev. Mike Magee with Brentwood First Presbyterian Church.

Magee said when churches don't communicate "God's unconditional love," the message can get confused and turn people away.

"So for those who do not go to church on Sunday mornings, I hear it is because they are 'spiritual but not religious,' " he said. "For many active churchgoing Christians, religious does not mean self-righteous, but instead means connected both to God and to fellow travelers in a particular body of Christ."

Presbyterians planning

But Magee believes that many of those who stay at home on Sunday mornings actually want a better relationship with God than they have now. He also thinks they want to be around other people. But if they don't attend church already, they want to know where they're welcome.

That's why Holy Week and Easter are a key time for churches to convince newcomers that church members want them to stay. At Brentwood First Presbyterian, Magee hopes a week filled with activities and services will offer an opportunity for some people to see what his church is about.

"We are having special music ensembles and soloists during Holy Week, a potluck brunch after our 9:30 worship on Palm Sunday and an Easter egg hunt

with an Easter Bunny after our 9:30 worship on Easter," Magee said. "Additionally, we are having a Taize worship and Seder meal at an unusual time, at 12 noon on Maundy Thursday. Hopefully this will appeal to those who work in Brentwood and can take out 45 minutes from work at lunchtime and for those who cannot get out at night."

Methodists follow suit

Brentwood First Presbyterian isn't the only church looking to take advantage of the lunch hour. Brentwood United Methodist Church, located close to the Maryland Farms business park, hopes some new faces stop by next week for the church's noon Holy Week worship service and lunch.

"The idea is, as opposed to having these for only our own people, to expand it out," the Rev. Jeremy Squires said. "I think there are 15,000-plus people in the business community of Maryland Farms. Those folks may go other places, but they might not go anywhere at all."

He said during Holy Week, the church can have as many as 700 people attending a service. This year, the church has put up posters in the area letting people know about the 30-minute noon services, each of which includes a featured speaker, music and catered lunch.

"One of our goals in the near future is to reach out to the needs of that business park," Squires said. "This is one of our first attempts."

Always be welcoming

At Christ Community Church in Franklin, the Rev. Scotty Smith said they aren't going to do anything different this spring. The idea, he explained, is to always be prepared for visitors, and don't put them on the spot when they do show up. "What we try to do is not exploit those times and single those people out, but be more faithful and creative in a way that would prove to be relevant," he said. "Address some real need in their heart that instinctively they'll say, 'That's a conversation I want to be a part of.' "

He said church members don't "throw a dog and pony show" to attract new people, but try to keep their doors open for everyone each Sunday. "I hope we are going to be consistently presenting God's love the way we would on any other Sunday," he said.

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