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Recommended Citation
Liberty University, "At Thomas Road, outreach is in" (2008). *March/April 2008*. Paper 17.
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At Thomas Road, outreach is in

April 29, 2008 ¦ Mitzi Bible

On Wednesday nights at Thomas Road Baptist Church, you will find car mechanics, quilters, electricians, real estate agents, NASCAR enthusiasts and painters. Then there are golfers, fishermen, guitar players and aerobics instructors. Not to mention table tennis fans and “The Biggest Losers.”

No, it’s not a career fair or a talent show, but a community outreach program sponsored by the church. Free adult classes on various subjects are held throughout the church and the Liberty University campus, in eight-week sessions.

The last session, which ran from Feb. 6 through April 2, offered 71 of these Community Interest Groups, with more than 1,400 people in attendance each week. Group leaders do a brief devotional and opening prayer and then jump into their subject of study. About 50 percent of the participants are not church members. The next session begins May 7.

“It’s fun … and it’s all free — that’s the biggest selling point we have,” says Discipleship Pastor Rod Dempsey.

Dempsey, a seminary professor, says the program’s goal is to use church members’ talents and skills as “the connection point, the bridge” to the community.

“Our goal would be to get as many people in from the community as possible and we do a relational evangelism approach: win them to yourself, win them to your church and then eventually win them to Christ. … So we have people in our church who have hobbies, interests, skills, abilities, talents, gifts and we have people out in the community who have the same set [of skills] so what we want to do is just connect these two together.”

The Rev. Jonathan Falwell said his father, the late Dr. Jerry Falwell, started the program in September 2006.

“The purpose of that was to bring in people from our community who were not part of our church, or unchurched people.” The relational approach, he said, “is about earning the right to be heard.”

Some groups are meeting real needs, too, such as English as a Second Language and GED.

Overall, the program has proven to be a successful outreach, giving the church more presence in the community.

“What happens is that it creates an image in the minds of the community that Thomas Road is ‘that church that does that thing on Wednesday night,’” Dempsey said.

And it has helped boost attendance at the church as well, he said.

“Every semester that we have it, it seems like our Sunday morning attendance swells. … It’s just a win-win for us in the fact that we involve our members and we involve the community.”

TRBC offers other groups open to the community throughout the week, including support and recovery groups on Monday nights, ladies Bible studies on Tuesday mornings and men’s groups on Friday mornings. For information on any of the groups, or to register, go to www.trbc.org or call (434) 239-9281.

Groups offered in the last session:

Advanced Computer
Alzheimer’s Support
Basic Budgeting
Basic Computer
Basic Guitar
Biggest Loser
Body and Soul
Bringing Up Boys
Church History in Plain Language
Classic Car Restoration
Crafts
Cross Stitching
Debt Reduction
Disability Doesn’t Mean Inability
Dispensational Bible Study
Drawing
English as a Second Language
Financial Planning
Fishing
Fitness
Freedom
Counselor Training

GED
Golf
Healthy Aging
Home Electrical Repair
Home School Help
Ice Skating
Interior Design
Investing
Keeping Life Simple
Knitting
Life of Jesus
Losing an Unsaved Loved One
Love and Respect
Marriage
Marriage Restoration
Martial Arts
Men’s Basketball
Men's Bible Study
Mentoring
Military Family Support
Model Aviation
Motorcycling
Mountain/Road Biking
NASCAR
Painting
Preparing for Marriage in Ministry
Public Speaking
Quilting
Real Estate Investment
Scrap Booking
Sign Language
Soccer
Song of Solomon
Spring Gobbler Hunting
Starting a Small Business
Table Tennis
Tennis
The Way of the Master Evangelism
Victoriously Frazzled
Video Basics
Voice Lessons
Water Aerobics
Weight Loss
Web Design
Witnessing
Working Women’s Wind-down