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Denominational lines blur with jelly, coffee

Church leaders and staff members from eight local church congregations met Friday (2/10) at the Jelly Pancake House in Merrillville to work toward a unified approach for serving communities in Northwest Indiana.

With laptops and notebooks strewn beside breakfast platters and coffee cups, the 12 attendees divided into three planning teams to discuss an agenda of items proposed for implementation in the next three to six months. The team of leaders, which ranged from Lutherans and Methodists to Reformed and nondenominational, sought to take the unity of this core group and extend it to their congregations.

“The Apostle Paul instructs us to use the gifts that God has given us to equip his people for works of service so that the church may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith,” said the Rev. Curtiss Asbell of New Covenant Assembly of God in Gary. “Salt & Light is providing leadership energy and a platform to line up our actions with what we say we believe.”

The talks are the second of recently started bi-weekly steering committee meetings hosted by Salt & Light of Northwest

Indiana. The catalyst for this growing push toward unity stems from the network's research project, "Salt & Light: A Guide to Loving Northwest Indiana," that was released in September 2011.

"The guidebook has uncovered and highlighted the great work of many churches and organizations in NWI," said Joey Mayfield, co-project leader of Salt & Light. "In doing so, it has brought and is bringing together the people who say, 'Wow, you are passionate about that too? Let's get together and talk.'"

Despite these talks, the committee faces obstacles of negative realities facing the local church and the communities in which they are found.

"Churches are pretty divided along racial and socioeconomic lines, which mirror the divisions in the community," said Nancy Walter, deaconess student of Holy Shepherd Lutheran in St. John. "This can be a drawback, but for those who are willing to reach across those barriers, a great opportunity is at hand to develop the relationships that will lead to spiritual growth and sustainable social change."

This opportunity includes coordinated outreach within the network's "crawl" stage of planning, building the movement to a running pace. The planning focused primarily on taking outreach efforts outside of the church and into the neighborhoods.

"Often, the church has become and is viewed as irrelevant," Asbell said. "Even for many Christians, it has become more a place of social gatherings and networking than a place for spiritual growth and spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ."

Coordinated block parties and service projects with local organizations remained the two priorities of discussion within the groups. Future "walk" and "run" stages of the movement will address some of the findings within the guidebook that include the 2,100 children in Northwest Indiana in need of foster care and the third grade reading levels of local schools.

These efforts reflect a growing movement toward unity that existed prior to Salt & Light.

"I think the church in NWI was ready for greater unity and a stronger message to the community," Mayfield said.

Salt & Light of NWI is a collaboration of local churches, non-profit organizations and community members seeking the welfare of communities and the proclamation of the Gospel. More information regarding this organization can be obtained by contacting Joey Mayfield at 219-663-9200 or jmayfield@bethelweb.org.

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