

# Open Doors at St. Mark's-in-the-Valley

*The hospitality of God and stewarding the gifts with which we are entrusted*

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The Open Doors program at St. Mark's-in-the-Valley serves members of the parish, local residents in the wider community and visitors to Los Olivos in several ways and **expresses the hospitality and generosity of God** as demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus Christ who drew the whole world back into relationship with God.

One of the collects for mission in Morning Prayer articulates the welcome and hospitality of Jesus in which we participate: "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you...." **The Open Doors program is that love made specific and experiential (knowable) for a wide range of people.**

One of the recent leaders in the field of congregational development, The Rev. William Tully wrote about the work of **welcome and hospitality as "Job #1"** – after the old Ford Motor Company advertisement. When he was Rector of St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue in New York City, Fr. Tully sought to reshape the understanding and practice of the connection between a church and its surrounding community in highly innovative and adaptive ways, recognizing that new patterns of being "church" or doing "church" are part of growth in new eras. Fr. Tully also noted that **"like all living beings, the church either grows or dies."**

For many decades the church has been redefining its understanding of mission and ministry, clarifying that its purpose must be **shaped by response to the actual community in which it is placed.** Local

faith communities assess the specific needs of those in immediate proximity to the church and tailor what they do to fit the people and organizations around them. In former days, parish churches tended to be oblivious to the world around them and found themselves to be self-referential, isolated enclaves in the midst of changing neighborhoods with no vital connection between the people of the church and the people of the world "God so loved" (John 3:16).

As the late 20<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the church is increasingly seen as a cultural anachronism, **parish churches have begun closing their doors at an accelerating rate** as younger generations have either fled or never been a part of church programs and as churches became increasingly disconnected and distant. **Churches that are currently thriving (and there are many examples) are openly embracing "the world"** as evident in their immediate vicinity and allowing the priorities of those who are within *and* outside the worshipping community to mandate the church's action.

Younger generations (50 and younger) are initially generally interested more in what it does to serve the world than in what a church believes. If a church is seen as substantively serving the world, these younger generations will often affiliate and gradually (later) become interested in the beliefs, teachings or other faith statements of the church.

Similarly, younger generations only donate to churches, groups or other organizations on the basis of how effectively those entities tangibly express the donor's values (recognized, when it comes to churches, in

the action or community service provided by the church).

Churches that survive and thrive are clear and enthusiastic about the reality that the church is a **public, not a private institution** and that church buildings and resources are public buildings and resources. Church leadership (ordained and lay) steward these resources on behalf of the larger world around them, including the self-defined church membership.

While *much* more has been said and written on mission (purposeful action) of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to look at the world around St. Mark's-in-the-Valley and the capacity of St. Mark's to adapt to the needs of the world it is given to serve, the Open Doors project seeks to:

- address the need to have a community center for people in a widely disbursed rural and small town context,
- welcome in and form relationships with people in a population that is largely unchurched and highly suspicious of or adversarial to religious organizations, and
- meet the needs of human beings who come to visit a town and region that is a tourist destination. Visitors or tourists are often uniquely available to first or renewed experiences of a church because they are in an unfamiliar environment with time to be curious.
- adapt to the unpredictable and demanding schedules of members and friends of the parish who often find their time for "church" to be at times when church services and programs are not formally scheduled.

### **Open Doors offers**

- open access to the worship space for people of "all faiths or none" all day, every day; people are invited to use the space in their own way including resting, meditating, praying, studying or other similar activities.
- open restrooms that are particularly needed in Los Olivos where there are no readily available public restrooms
- available open WiFi
- a welcome Courtyard with benches, shade and a fountain for rest and conversation, often decorated seasonally and with thought-provoking and inspiring art objects
- ice water on very hot days, a water fountain on all days
- water for dogs
- the labyrinth to walk
- access to beautiful gardens including rose gardens with over 70 rose bushes that are tended weekly throughout the long growing season (experience of beauty)
- weekday greeters during the hours of 10 am and 2 pm to provide a personal welcome
- printed prayer and reflection resources seasonally
- a lawn for rest, gathering, picnicking and games
- meeting and event rooms on a no-fee basis for non-profit, community based groups
- rehearsal and performance space for musicians and theatre groups on a no-fee basis
- exhibition space for area artists

### **Open Doors serves**

- identified members of the faith community
- area neighbors/residents
- area organizations
- area musicians and artists
- visitors to the area
- service workers in the area (delivery drivers, plumbers, electricians, sales staffs)

- approximately 80 groups, concerts, exhibitions have been welcomed to St. Mark's annually
- people who see themselves as committed Christians
- people who see themselves as committed adherents of other faith traditions
- people who are "spiritual but not religious"
- people who are atheist and anti-theist
- people of every age group
- people who, for a variety of reasons, see themselves as on a cultural fringe and who have a preconceived notion that they would be unwelcome in a church

### **Benefits to St. Mark's**

- The benefits to St. Mark's are primarily in loving others as Jesus told us to do in the New Commandment and in endeavoring to emulate the ministry of Jesus who came to serve, not to be served.
- In the process of serving, people who live in the surrounding area or visit often have developed an identification with St. Mark's that includes affection and various expressions of encouragement and support, including financial support.
- Parish leaders and members are able to maintain an ongoing conversation with a wide variety of people in the context of St. Mark's, often with people who would otherwise not visit in a church or speak with church people.
- On occasion, someone who initially came to St. Mark's as a visitor becomes a member of the worshipping community and part of the committed network of support within the parish for supporting the Open Doors project.
- The program allows St. Mark's to be good stewards of both the fixed operating costs of the parish and good stewards of the multi-million dollar asset of the buildings on the campus.
- People generally think and speak well of St. Mark's, a benefit in a global and local climate that is generally negative or adversarial about "religion" and "organized religion." People often say, "I don't go to church, but if I did go to church I would go to St. Mark's."
- There is some benefit to security and a general sense of liveliness as St. Mark's does not appear to be an abandoned building as is often the case with other churches.
- The church does not have to adopt a role outside of its given role as a servant.

### **The cost of Open Doors**

The program largely operates within the fixed operating costs of owning and operating the campus of buildings. It also allows use of the buildings that have been erected and paid for and are costly assets of the parish. **The only way to make our buildings worth owning and maintaining is using them as much as possible.**

In previous years, the church approached use of the buildings as a **landlord** renting space to tenants and charging fees. Some fees were collected that are no longer collected as fees. At the same time, that approach positioned the church in a non-service role, as a **self-serving institution** and **reinforcing negative attitudes** about "money-grubbing" churches generally.

The benefit of the small amount of fees collected was offset by the related loss of esteem and relationship with neighbors and organizations that serve the community when individuals and organizations were charged by the church. Also lost was the opportunity to be in relationship with the people involved as **most of those people and organizations did not come** and pay the fees.

Conversely, **building-use revenue at St. Mark's climbed markedly when community based and non-profit groups and individuals were NOT charged by the church.** When generously given space without expectation of remuneration, **groups and individuals make gifts to the church out of**

**gratitude that exceed the fees charged** both in number and magnitude.

The experience of St. Mark's is **charging fees results in lower income** in addition to **other more substantive losses** under the "benefits" section above.

Additionally, **charging fees engenders a "renter" mentality in those who use the building** and the demand for services to come with what they have "paid" – room setup, cleaning, equipment and so on.

On top of the baseline operating (fixed) costs that would be significant whether the doors were open or closed there is some additional energy and water use to support Open Doors. Occasional repairs need to be made in the course of "wear and tear." (There would be some level of wear and tear with or without the Open Doors building use.)

### **Commercial and private uses of the church buildings**

When commercial entities (such as a film crew) ask to use church buildings or the grounds, a substantial donation is discussed and agreed in advance. It is also true that recommended donations are agreed with non-members using the buildings for weddings or other *private* family or personal occasions.

To raise income at St. Mark's, more commercial and private use of the buildings and grounds can be promoted, while attending to **restrictions placed on non-profit organizations earning Unrelated Business Income (URBI)**. A percentage of URBI is allowed non-profit groups annually.

