



## Twelve-Year-Old Boy Sparks Church Growth

by Judi Murphy

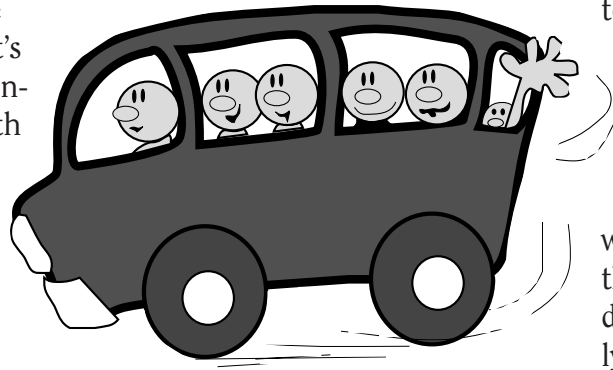
**I**t started with one student inviting some friends to a Wednesday night youth group. But what started with a casual invitation has turned into an explosion of growth at Oak City Assembly of God in Tallahassee, Florida.

In 1999, John Hester, youth pastor at Oak City, had about 20 kids. In three years, the Wednesday night youth activities have grown tenfold—200 kids are now attending the group. “It’s all mainly due to our bus ministry,” said John Hester, youth pastor. “And it has only led to other opportunities.”

The bus ministry started at the beginning of the school term that year when one family decided to get their twelve-year-old son more involved in the church. “The story they tell me is that he liked the youth activities and decided to invite a few of his buddies,” said Hester. “So his parents brought his buddies too. They liked it, started inviting friends, and before long these two parents were using their personal vehicles to pick up ten to twelve students every week.”

Hester said that’s when the

parents asked if they could borrow the twelve-passenger church van on Wednesday nights to make pickups. “This van was not a very good van at all,” said Hester. “I mean, we were scared to take this thing out of town. But they would come every Wednesday, pick up the van, and then go get the kids and bring them to church.”



Word of mouth began spreading, and by January 2000, just four months later, there were more students wanting to attend the church than there was room in the van. “The church board caught the vision of what was happening,” Hester said. “They purchased two new 15-passenger vans. Then those began to get overfull, so the church bought a 28-passenger

flex bus. Right now, all the vehicles are full, and we are renting another 15-passenger van for pickups, and even it is full!

“This has not only been good for the youth, but for the Royal Rangers and Missionettes too,” Hester added. “As the teens come, so do their little brothers and sisters.” Hester says some families have even started coming, at the prompting of their teens.

“Most of them come from broken homes, with mid- to lower-class families, but they love being here,” said Hester. “It has to be the Holy Spirit who is drawing them. We’re not the biggest church around. We do try to make our services really dynamic, but I am aware that there will always be a church serving a bigger ice cream cone somewhere down the road.”

Hester has given Wednesday night services a very evangelistic focus. “Eighty percent of our Wednesday night group has no church background. We try to be very strategic. We have told kids, if you bring your friends on Wednesday night, they will hear a gospel message.”

The Wednesday services are

just the beginning of a strategic plan that helps students get plugged into the church. “If we get them coming on Wednesdays, we don’t automatically invite them to Sunday morning service. Our Sunday nights are our time for discipleship, like a Sunday School hour. We invite them to that. Then after they have been going to that for a while, they actually want to be coming on Sunday morning.”

Hester also uses his “church kids” to help reach, disciple and set the example for those com-

ing in with no church background. “I tell them this is an outreach opportunity coming to us,” said Hester. “I have tried to really sell them on the idea that this is a mission field right here in our own church and they can be used to impact students that have been brought to us. I want them to model the example and to minister to other students. I encourage them to use Sunday nights to get filled up so that when they come on Wednesday, they can pour out into these new students coming in.”

According to Hester, the support of the church body has really been a key to the growth. “It was really obvious when God opened this up, and the pastor and the church board just got on board with it. They really caught the vision of what God wanted to do. This has been a paradigm shift for the whole church.”

Hester only expects more growth to come. “It reminds me of the story in the Old Testament,” said Hester. “As long as you keep putting out pots, God fills them.”

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### **Questions for Further Study—**

1. In what ways are your Wednesday night programs sparking growth?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How might your church be able to change the Wednesday night programs to encourage church growth?