

Prayer Summit stresses churches working together to help city
Lincoln Journal Star
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11/24/2007, pg 1C

Churches, schools and city government need to work together to help meet the needs of Lincoln's citizens. That was a major theme of last weekend's Leadership Prayer Summit, held at Camp Carol Joy Holling near Ashland. Forty-five leaders of churches and other Christian organizations in Lincoln attended, along with some key public figures: Police Chief Tom Casady, Superintendent of Schools Susan Gourley and City Council members Robin Eschliman and Doug Emery. "We asked each of them what challenges Lincoln is facing and what can churches do to be part of the solution," said Stu Kerns, pastor of Zion Church and an organizer of the event. "We had great discussions."

The religious leaders took seriously the suggestions from the civic leaders, particularly in terms of better networking and cooperation among religious institutions, he said. Casady suggested that there should be more neighborhood churches, especially in neighborhoods with problems such as drugs, gangs and domestic violence. Churches provide a community and a place people can turn to for help, he said.

Kerns took that message to heart because his own congregation will soon move to the former Southwood Lutheran Building at 5511 S. 27th St. The church's historic structure at Ninth and D streets was destroyed in a fire June 9. While moving the main church out of the inner city, Zion plans to start another congregation in a building it owns at Eighth and D streets to maintain a presence in the neighborhood, he said. Other churches whose main campuses are on the outskirts of the city also could start churches in the city's older neighborhoods, Kerns said. Other problems identified by Casady, Gourley and the council members were drugs, alcohol and "the breakdown of the family," Kerns said. Churches can help with all those problems by providing love and care to people who lack a support system, he said.

One repeated theme at the prayer summit was "get out of your bubble," said Al Riskowski of the Nebraska Family Council, another participant in the event. Churches need to go beyond their theological differences and work together on such issues as hunger, homelessness and programs to help young people and families, he said. Riskowski noted that the Family Council recently moved its headquarters to an old house at 11th and E streets in the Everett neighborhood. More than 400 people attended a neighborhood picnic there Sept. 30, but "we need more ongoing programs," he said.

Emery said he found the meeting extremely valuable because it showed city officials that the religious community really wants to help. He cited Clinic with a Heart as an example of a local faith-based response to a community need. A number of churches support the

clinic, which uses retired physicians to provide medical services to low-income people, he said.

One big problem facing the city in the future is an aging population, which will require more services than city government alone can afford, Emery said. That's one area where churches can fill the gap, by offering education, recreation and other programs for seniors, he said. "Government can't be everything for everybody, and it's up to the religious community to step in there and help," Emery said. Helping people in need is a two-way street, Kerns noted. "Churches need to demonstrate openness to people who have needs, and people need to see that they can be part of a church community," he said. He added that evangelical Christians often are viewed as critical of society, but not willing to be part of the solution. "We need to let the community know that we're here to serve."

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