

Finding common ground in Portland



Members of Southlake Church paint the Roosevelt High School gym. *Photos courtesy of CityServe*

In a divisive time of culture wars and hot-button social issues, CityServe Portland focuses on what people have in common, bringing them together to love and serve their city.

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In some quarters, it's fair to say, evangelical Christians have a definite reputation problem, says Kevin Palau.

He should know.

As president of the Luis Palau Association in Portland, Ore., Palau is an evangelical leader in one of the most unchurched cities in America. He's seen firsthand the antagonism that Christians, evangelical and otherwise, can prompt in a post-Christian culture.

To many people outside the church -- and even to some within -- evangelicals are known more for what they are against than what they are for, he said.

"Many people view the evangelical community as nothing more than a political agenda," Palau said. "It is hurting our gospel witness."

But that perception may be changing throughout Portland and the Pacific Northwest, thanks to an unusual partnership between evangelical churches and city leaders, working together for the betterment of the community. Created six years ago by the Palau Association and city officials, [CityServe Portland](#) connects congregations with dozens of efforts to improve life for area residents. It links churches with volunteer opportunities in schools, foster care, homeless shelters, health clinics and more.

Launched and administered by the Palau Association, CityServe is unapologetically Christian, an effort to reach out in mission and witness. Yet proselytizing is not allowed. In a divisive time marked by culture wars and hot-button social issues, CityServe focuses on what people have in common, bringing them together to love and to serve their city.

The program began in 2008, when the [Palau Association](#) pulled together evangelical churches across Portland for what was to be a one-time summer-long program called "Season of Service."

Based in Beaverton, a Portland suburb, the association was founded by Kevin Palau's father, Luis Palau, an international evangelist who had been mentored early in his ministry by the Rev. Billy Graham. For years, the association has hosted festivals in cities around the world, bringing together tens of thousands of believers to celebrate and share the gospel.

Kevin Palau wanted to use the association's long-established capacity as a convener to bring hundreds of churches together to work on behalf of Portland.

Two simple questions

It would be a new endeavor for both the churches and the city. For years, Palau said, evangelicals had been sitting on the sidelines, unengaged in meeting the needs of Portland.

As they began planning that first Season of Service, Palau said, he and other evangelicals went "hat-in-hand, very embarrassed and humble" to city leaders to ask two simple questions:

How can we help? And how can we work together?

Incoming Mayor Sam Adams -- who is politically liberal and openly gay -- and other officials were skeptical at first. They wondered whether the church people would turn out and, if so, would serve without attempting to proselytize.



Evangelical leader Kevin Palau and former Portland Mayor Sam Adams talk to ABC News about their partnership to serve their city.

But they also knew that Portland's needs were much greater than the municipal government's ability to meet them. Adams and Palau decided to concentrate on what they and other Portland residents shared: a love for their city.

"Precisely because we may not find common ground on everything, let's work all the harder to find common ground on what we can," Palau said. "We all care about a more livable Portland."

In those early meetings, Palau and his team committed to work long-term with city leaders to solve problems in Portland, hoping to build trust along the way.

That first Season of Service delivered on the promise. The association turned out more than 20,000 volunteers from hundreds of churches who spent five months cleaning up schools, donating to food banks and serving Portland's homeless population.

At the end of that first summer, residents celebrated the program's success in a festival at Portland's Waterfront Park. Welcoming thousands of evangelicals, Adams gave the crowd an unexpected call to action.

"I told everyone that Season of Service had gone so well that I wanted to encourage us all to do it every year," Adams said.

Awakening the sleeping giant

After that, Season of Service became an annual effort, and in 2013 it was rebranded as CityServe. More an evolving movement than an organization, CityServe is built upon a simple vision of mobilizing what Palau calls the "sleeping giant" of the evangelical community to love and serve with no strings attached.

Waking that giant, getting hundreds of churches unified and ready to act, is always a challenge, Palau said. It is no small miracle when 49 of the Portland metro area's 50 largest churches are working together and not worrying about who gets credit.

Like any other organization, churches can be competitive and even at times mistrusting of one another, Palau said. Pastors can be reluctant to jump on someone else's bandwagon and may eye one another warily, worried about attempts at "sheep stealing," luring their members away.

Before that first Season of Service, Portland evangelicals had no real network. Various groups of pastors might pray together, and youth pastors occasionally met and shared ideas, but the city's 400 evangelical churches had no collective voice helping them seek the shalom of Portland together.

The association stepped in as a neutral convener to bring churches together with one another and with city agencies.

"We have the ability to speak to the broad evangelical community," Palau said. "That's something that has to be cultivated, to keep those relationships going."

Palau calls CityServe a "relational movement" that celebrates what is already happening and then accelerates it. The program is about bringing key players to the table, getting them talking with one another, and then stepping back and letting the rest evolve organically, he said.

CityServe doesn't provide services directly or compete with the nonprofits already at work throughout Portland. The Luis Palau Association staffs the CityServe office, but the actual work of helping others is done at the grass-roots level by volunteers from participating churches. The program's seven focus areas -- schools, homelessness, hunger, health, foster care, human trafficking and gang violence -- grew out of conversations and relationships between local churches and the

mayor's office, school officials, the Department of Human Services, and nonprofits such as Union Gospel Mission and the Portland Rescue Mission.

The same two questions

CityServe tries to keep everyone focused on the same questions Palau asked in the initial meeting with city officials: How can we help? And how can we work together?

As trust is built between the participating churches and the partner organizations and agencies, new service ventures are birthed. And by celebrating what people are doing and telling their stories on the CityServe Portland website, CityServe inspires others to form their own partnerships, and the network grows.

CityServe's focus on foster care, for example, began with one couple at one church and has spread to 80 churches, and partnerships with all nine Department of Human Services offices in the Portland metro area. The participating churches have, among other things, helped recruit new foster families, prepared welcome kits for every child entering the foster care system, provided foster parents with monthly nights out, and repainted and redecorated the Human Services offices.

Similarly, CityServe has been at the forefront of raising awareness about juvenile sex trafficking in Portland. Churches provide volunteers and raise money to support groups such as the Sexual Assault Resource Center in Beaverton and Janus Youth Programs for at-risk youth in Portland.

But CityServe has had perhaps its greatest impact working with schools. North Portland's Roosevelt High School may be the best example, said Jon Isaacs, the senior policy advisor for Portland Public Schools.



For years, Roosevelt was on the school district's list of high-poverty schools with the lowest test scores. By the mid-2000s, attendance had deteriorated to the low hundreds, and the graduation rate hovered at a mere 40 percent. Just a few years ago, the school was facing the very real possibility of closing.

Church members come together for a clean-up day at Roosevelt High School.

But then, in 2008, SouthLake Foursquare Church -- more than 20 miles away in West Linn, Ore. -- stepped in.

What began as a one-time school cleanup effort by SouthLake volunteers evolved into an everyday presence at the school. Today, the church operates clothes and food closets at Roosevelt and provides tutoring and mentoring to students, all coordinated by two paid staffers on campus.

"They built this incredible relationship not only with the school but with the larger community," said Larry Whittlesey, the executive director of CityServe's School Partnership Network.

Thanks in large part to SouthLake's efforts, Roosevelt started to change, which in turn helped spark other changes. Gangs went away. Nike got involved and helped put in a brand-new football field. The morale of the school staff went up. Graduation rates went up 20 points in five years, and enrollment increased to nearly 1,000 students.

"The school has just emerged," Isaacs said. "There's no question that the partnership with the faith community was one of the key elements of [Roosevelt] really coming back and now being on a path to being a model high school in our system."

A partner for every school

School officials were so pleased that, in January 2012, Portland Public Schools Superintendent Carole Smith asked Palau to find a church partner for every school in the district. As a result of that conversation, CityServe created its School Partnership Network to focus on the effort. Two years later, more than 250 of the 471 public schools in the greater Portland/Vancouver metro area have a meaningful, sustainable relationship with a local church or other faith organization.

The partnerships are strongest in schools that need the support the most, particularly those serving low-income students, students of color and students with disabilities.

"We're working with all 29 districts in the metro area, just finding ways to connect schools," Whittlesey said. "It's like a wildfire. We just keep lighting matches and throwing gas on it."

Whittlesey doesn't know how many volunteers participate in the School Partnership Network. He has no control over the partnerships; they are formed out in the community. CityServe merely tries



FourSquare church members unload mulch for landscaping at Roosevelt High.

to provide top-down motivation and vision and tell the community projects' stories.

CityServe's brand of outreach ministry is "nothing new under the sun," Palau said.

Evangelicals have always tried to reach out in word and deed. CityServe has just been able to do that more collectively, allowing every church, big and small, to find its best path to service.

Ultimately, the CityServe model is about balancing the good news with good works, Palau said.

"Unless you are tangibly serving people's needs, that's not really the whole message of Christ,"

he said. "If we neglect loving and serving our neighbors, we're just viewed as the guy standing on the street corner with the sandwich board, yelling through a megaphone, 'We're all going to hell.'"

Six years after that first summer, CityServe continues to evolve and is well on its way to being a national movement. Similar CityServe programs have been established in many cities, including Houston, San Diego, Sacramento, Little Rock and Phoenix. Palau and Adams often travel together to national conferences to tell the success story of CityServe in the decidedly non-Bible Belt city of Portland.

The new programs popping up across the country are all independent, locally operated nonprofits, with their own executive directors and boards. The CityServe office in Beaverton provides consulting and coaching resources, such as bimonthly calls with Palau to share best practices and address challenges.

Clearly, other cities can learn much from CityServe. One of the most important lessons is simply how to overcome differences, Adams said.

"The lesson learned here is to be respectful of where we have differences but to take action to improve our communities on the issues we do agree on," Adams said. "When it's focused on a local level, that agreement and action quickly changes people's lives for the better."

It's about relationships, not projects. It's about loving your neighbors. It's about common ground and common good, he said.

"It requires us to be the adults we're supposed to be," Adams said.

Differences and disagreements may not evaporate overnight, but CityServe proves that evangelicals can move beyond the divisive issues of our times and work with others in a spirit of love and service, Palau said. CityServe might look new, but its real lesson is ancient, he said.

"You don't have to look long at all in Scripture to find that what's happening in Portland is an embarrassingly simple and obvious thing to do," Palau said. "Work together."

Questions to consider:

- To whom does your institution ask the two simple questions of this story -- How can we help? And how can we work together?
- How do you seek and find common ground with unexpected partners?
- With whom is your organization seeking to build trust in service of a larger vision?
- What aspects of your most successful programs could be replicated by other organizations facing similar challenges and opportunities?
- In what ways would your embodiment of the gospel surprise those with preconceived notions about the church and its witness?