

Planting Churches in Metro East

Raising the bar

A pastor with a past returns home to share the good news that changed his life. But, where will his new church meet?

Breese | On Sunday morning, Leah Hart is on a brightly lit platform singing a current praise song in a strong voice, backed by guitar, keyboard, and drums. A crowd of about 60 people singing with her picks up on the lyrics which are new to many of them. Some are seated on high stools at pub tables, and no one seems to notice the neon beer signs on the walls or the giant horseshoe-shaped bar behind them.

“I can’t believe how well a bar is set up to be used as a church,” said **Levi Hart**, Leah’s husband. “It’s a sports bar/concert venue. You see the bar and all the liquor bottles and all that, then all over the place you see things saying ‘Ignite Church.’”

Levi is describing Big Stix, the establishment in his hometown where he and Leah are planting a church. “And you see a bunch of people there for a completely different purpose than the night before, when it was packed full of people getting drunk.”

Levi nods and chuckles a little. He’s still amazed that it’s working, this new church plant that turns a bar into a sanctuary on Sunday morning. It’s working very well.

Since the Harts began holding services in March, more than 20 people have accepted Christ. The church has held two baptism services using a horse trough on the concrete floor in front of the stage.

Ignite Church is one of 17 new churches started in Illinois so far this year. IBSA helped plant 23 new churches in 2015, and at any given time, there are as many as 80 church planters in the process of starting new congregations in the state. Their work is supported in part by giving through the Mission Illinois Offering.



While national partners target the cities in particular, IBSA also is planting outside the large metro areas.

“We are finding that many of the smaller and more rural communities in Illinois have less gospel presence now than they did 20 or 30 years ago,” said **Van Kicklighter**, head of church planting for IBSA. “In many places, the mainline churches that once served these communities are closing their doors, leaving a real void and opportunity for gospel-preaching churches to be planted.”

At issue is having planters and funds to support them, Kicklighter said. “We have far more opportunities for planting churches in the smaller communities of Illinois than we have leaders and churches willing to go there and plant their lives.”

And that makes Levi Hart’s story even more special.

What about Breese?

Levi wasn't sure his idea would work—and for good reason. “I asked my wife, ‘Leah, do you think we should plant a church?’” Levi was serving as a youth minister in a nearby town at the time and feeling a call to something more.

“She said, ‘Yeah, yeah, absolutely. What about Breese?’”

“I said, ‘Ah, that’s not gonna work. My house got raided in Breese.’ I thought there’s no way, you know.”

No way, because it was in Breese that Levi fell into alcohol and drug abuse as a teenager. It was in Breese that Levi was arrested for selling drugs. And it was in Breese that Levi earned a reputation.

But jailed and facing up to five years in prison, Levi entered rehab and started attending a Bible study. There he heard the gospel. The Bible study leader confronted him.

“I hit my knees and asked for forgiveness for everything for the first time in my life,” Levi said. “I woke up the next day a new creation!”

Now 26, the young man grins and nods as he says the words. Levi is still amazed that God would call him back here to be a pastor and plant a church.

Hometown heroics

Breese is a small town of about 4,500 about 30 miles east of St. Louis. In the surrounding area, there are almost 20,000 residents, but only a handful of churches. Breese has two Protestant churches. For such a small place, it’s a party town, according to Levi. For the young people, there’s not much else to do.

“What’s missing in Breese is the gospel,” he said. That’s why he’s burdened for the people who live there. “It’s basically an unreached people group. There’s like 98% of the people here who don’t know Jesus.”

So a church that meets in a bar shouldn’t be a surprise.

“He’s going where the people are, going to his context,” said **Eddie Pullen**, IBSA’s church planting strategist in the Metro East region. “He’s

reaching people who have no exposure at all to the gospel.”

As an IBSA specialist in church planting, Pullen helps new pastors navigate the challenges of starting a church. Pullen draws from his own experience.

He planted Mosaic Church in nearby Highland and serves as its teaching pastor. Mosaic is the sponsoring congregation for the Harts’ ministry.

“We’re grateful to be a part of it,” Pullen said, getting misty-eyed. “He causes a thirst for people who may not know they’re thirsty.”

Or, amid the bottles and signs, what they’re really thirsting for.

Living water and holy fire

The bar is closed on Mondays. That’s when Levi leads a Bible study.

After a family-style dinner, the children go next door to an area the bar’s owner has allowed them to renovate for nursery, classroom, and office space. Leah and several of her family members teach the children’s Bible study in rooms painted with animals parading into Noah’s Ark, while Levi opens the Scriptures for their parents.

On this night, one man asks a couple of questions revealing this material is new to him. Levi lays aside his teaching plan and for nearly an hour shares a clear presentation of the gospel, focusing on sin, the cross, and salvation in Jesus Christ. He shares some of his own story along the way. The man listens attentively.

Levi expected to reach people his own age, but “what happened is we have a large group of 35- to 55-year-olds. A lot of people that age around here are hungry for something more.”

Today in Breese, Levi and Leah are fanning the flames of the gospel through their ministry at Ignite Church. “You know,” he said, “that’s what I want our church to do...ignite a fire...and see lives changed.”

► Watch Levi Hart’s story at missionillinois.org