

Give them the gospel

A new ministry reignited this church's passion



Mission Illinois Offering &
Week of Prayer | Sept. 8-15

Outside the white wooden First Baptist Church building, Atwood is quiet on Wednesday evening. A few parents stroll babies on the sidewalks, and a group of teen boys walks toward the school gym, basketball in hand. This community of just over 1,000 people is minutes from Illinois' Amish country.

From the church parking lot, though, the thump, thump, thump of a bass line played over stereo speakers gets louder at the door. Inside the darkened auditorium, children and teens swing their arms and stomp their feet—matching the motions of a worship leader onstage.

This is Ignite, FBC Atwood's year-old ministry for kids and students. On this Wednesday night, Pastor **Lanny Faulkner** will baptize 17 young people who came to Christ through Ignite or



FAULKNER

another of the church's ministries for kids and teens. (The church baptized 15 people total last year.)

His church understands the statistics, Faulkner said. Most people that come to faith in Christ do so at a young age.



"If we're going to change the world, we have to change Atwood," said Faulkner, who has led the church since 2006. "If we're going to change Atwood, we have to reach children and young families."

Braving a new world

The generation coming of age now has experienced the world in a completely different way than the adults leading them at church, said **Jimmy Hammond**, an IBSA associate who facilitates student ministry around the state.

"For us, the challenge is learning how to see things from their perspective, so we can find meaningful ways to connect to them," Hammond said. Throughout the year, IBSA sponsors camps and conferences for kids of all ages, and training opportunities specifically tailored for children's and youth leaders.

Those events are possible because of the Mission Illinois Offering & Week of Prayer. Collected in September in churches across Illinois, the Offering helps provide missions and ministry that address critical needs in the state. MIO also supports IBSA personnel like Director of Next Generation Ministries Jack Lucas.

As IBSA and church leaders partner together to reach the next generation, they recognize the window is narrow. A 2004 Barna study found that 43% of Americans who profess faith in Jesus do so before they turn 13, and 64% before their 18th birthday.

The next generation presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for church leaders. They see the problems in the world around them, Hammond said, but they're not content to sit idly. They want to be involved; they want to make a difference. "But they're just not sure how to do that.

"We know the answer to that: the gospel's the way to make the biggest, most meaningful change in the world."

In the world, and in Atwood. Every Wednesday at the beginning of Ignite, attenders read or recite a 30-second gospel summary. Ignite leaders say they've heard kids sharing the gospel summary at school. And Faulkner recently baptized an entire family that came to Christ after the children heard the gospel every week. The parents, sitting at the back of the auditorium, heard it too, and responded in faith.

Finding what works

For 25 years, FBC Atwood church hosted a successful Wednesday night children's ministry that depended on many teachers. When the number of available teachers dwindled, the church had to get a new vision for the ministry. They tweaked the structure so that fewer teachers are required. The church saw an average of 120 young people every Wednesday during Ignite's first year.

Some things are the same, though. Faulkner still rides the church bus on Wednesday nights as it picks up a dozen or more children from neighboring communities. The pastor serves as bus captain (or monitor); the driver is a deputy sheriff who has been transporting kids to and from the church for 25 years. His wife, who recently passed away, started the original kids' ministry in Atwood. Together, Faulkner said, the couple is responsible for hundreds of kids coming to know Christ.

On Wednesday nights in Atwood, the message is also the same as it always has been.

"The gospel is the power of God unto salvation," Faulkner says. "It's not preaching ability, teaching ability, how exciting the music is. The thing that brings people under conviction, the things that bring them to repentance and faith, is the gospel."