



# Reaching the Anti-Churched: Monroe Park Vineyard

By Dorothy Ross • June 3, 2015

## The Obstacle

*Out of concern for the number of her former students who walked away from their faith in their 20s, Dorothy Ross, an artist and former high school art teacher, decided in 2004 to plant Monroe Park Vineyard Church in her hometown of Rochester, N.Y. But as the grandmother of three started to reach out to a much younger generation, she found that many of the 20-somethings in town were practicing paganism, Buddhism, Wicca and other types of decidedly non-Christian spirituality. Clearly they had an interest in spiritual things, but Ross didn't know how to reach these young people who were not just unchurched, but anti-church. In her online research about how to reach pagans and those involved in witchcraft, all she found were websites warning Christians away from them. Ross likes challenges, though, and determined to blaze her own trail.*

## The Opportunity

I'd been a teacher in a Christian school and watched my students lose their faith or drop out of church for years, and I kept trying to persuade somebody there was a problem and they needed to do something—I didn't realize it was me that needed to do it. But the majority of young adults I spend time with cannot even conceive of a church being a positive thing; a loving church is an oxymoron to them.

First I had to learn to be missional; I had to treat it like we were going to another culture. What are their values? What language do they speak? What are some ways God is already moving among them? I had to come in and respect their culture, rather than try to turn it upside down; I had to fit into their culture to even get noticed. I planted in an urban Rochester neighborhood that is the birthplace of Spiritualism in the U.S. This legacy of alternative spirituality has continued to this day. I find plenty of pagans, witches, warlocks, as well as Buddhists. It is also a

neighborhood full of young indie/hipster musicians and artists. Many are literally starving artists. Some of these kids have been homeless and dumpster diving.

We basically developed a system: Attract people by giving a place to express themselves, give an opportunity to build friendships without pressure on that friendship—and food is really important! We hold frequent music shows and art shows where we invite nonbelievers and pagans to play their music or show their art. It is rarely, if ever, censored and we don't charge anything, we don't preach, and while we don't normally initiate spiritual conversations—thus keeping the atmosphere “safe”—we pray for them to initiate a conversation about Jesus and they usually do. We try to build relationships with them and invite them to our weekly art and music hangout where we supply art materials and food. The majority of people who come to those hangouts are not Christians. It's an open climate where people can talk about whatever spirituality they want, and we pray in advance for opportunities for spiritual conversations. God has never disappointed us by not giving opportunities for those conversations.

We've come to understand this generation's value of tolerance as a blessing. They may hate Christians, but they don't want to be intolerant. So we share stories, and each person listens to the other's stories without passing judgment—it's just all my stories happen to be about Jesus. I listen to their stories and try to hear where the Holy Spirit is already working ... maybe the person sharing is into Wicca because of healing properties, so I can talk about Jesus healing people in the Gospels. I'm trying to offer them what they're already looking for and don't realize.

Some [from the art hangout] start showing up on Sundays. I'm learning how to maintain church and reach these people who have absolutely no framework for church. We set up the room like a big living room instead of a church; we have about 40 people coming each Sunday. I moved away from a sermon format because it's really difficult to meet the person who's never heard this before while not boring to tears the person who already knows the basics. So I open up the format for questions and discussion. This gives an opportunity for me to not be the only teacher in the room, and for those who have known the Lord for a while to share what they know, and this way they are more engaged, and no one leaves without their questions answered.

I did my two-year plan like any good church planter—I think it's still sitting in a file drawer somewhere. [Small church consultant] Dave Jacobs said he saw us as explorers in the jungle, with no trail to follow, having to make our way through. These guys are living on the edge and well aware they have needs. There's a certain point in life where you are experimenting with life and trying to figure out who you are as an adult. Their lives aren't set in stone and they're open to spirituality; they aren't closed- minded. I just find it the most rewarding age group. Plus, if you reach someone for Christ at this age, they keep ministering to the next generation and the next generation—you get to see a lifetime of fruit.

—*Dorothy Ross, as told to Joy Netanya Thompson*