



When the Market Came to Town

Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. —JEREMIAH 29:7

How an unexpected partnership brought vitality to an urban neighborhood and help to hard-working farmers

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In 1997 I prayed an ardent prayer: “Lord, I’m not a mover-and-a-shaker kind of guy, but I’m willing. I don’t know what direction First Covenant should take in blessing our city, but if you’ll show me, I’ll try to say ‘yes’ to those ministries and I’ll try to help our congregation do the same.”

That prayer precipitated several significant ministries dropping into our laps. Among other opportunities, one man contacted me and asked if the Spokane farmers’ market could meet in our parking lot during the summer. We had time to think about it, so I told him I’d call him back.

First Covenant Church in Spokane, Washington, is the most centrally located church building in the city. The first description I saw of the neighborhood included the term “urban blight.” When I arrived at First Covenant in 1991, the apartment building adjacent to our parking lot was a den of drugs, domestic violence, and prostitution. The police told me that it was the worst place in town, and the local newspaper had written a spate of articles about its horrors.

I began praying about how we might be involved in taking the neighborhood back.

The Idea

My initial reaction to the idea of the farmers' market moving to our parking lot was negative. First, I reasoned, a farmers' market is merely a commercial enterprise with making money as its goal. I feared commercialism crouching to lunge at us.

Second, farmers' markets characteristically cater to middle- and upper-class shoppers. The prices are usually higher than a supermarket and are not geared for the poor. Because we were situated in a poor neighborhood, this reality weighed on me.

Third, a decision to close our parking lot two days a week until 1 p.m. all summer sounded overwhelming. What about weddings and funerals?

Instead of making a quick decision based on these early reactions, I prayed. I am now confident that God's thoughts were different from mine.

One day, before I had come to a decision, I happened upon the agricultural report on TV. Besides being unbelievably boring, it was absolutely negative. After forty-five minutes I screamed, "Isn't this guy ever going to say anything positive?" and I turned it off.

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Then it hit me—farmers are hard-working people who are hurting financially. The more I thought about it the more I realized that this is especially true of local farmers. Suddenly, the commercial aspect of a farmers' market took on a redemptive character. By allowing local farmers to sell their goods at retail prices, we would be helping an economically depressed population. With their income dependent upon the growing season (a short one in the Northwest), I couldn't imagine how farmers could

make it financially by merely selling wholesale.

Why had I watched that silly report? Now I know.

About this time something happened that made me really angry at the entire advertising industry. As I fumed about almost being ripped off, I thought about the temptations of advertising. If you pay me \$1,000 to sell your apples, I am probably going to go tell the world that these are the best apples in town regardless of whether I have tasted them or whether I even like apples. It's just business, right? Or is it lying?

The next thought came to me as easily as water flowing down a hill. At a farmers' market you can ask the grower herself about the apples and she will simply cut you a slice so you can taste one. In other words, farmers' markets are almost inherently honest—no middleman. Too expensive? Walk away or cut a deal. Leaving a farmers' market feeling ripped off by your purchase seems almost impossible.

During that same week I got a call from a friend in Massachusetts where I went to school. This triggered memories of Haymarket Square, the

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open-air fruit and vegetable market in Boston, and of Faneuil Hall Marketplace nearby, and the fun I had there. Visions of hawkers, musicians, and jugglers came to mind.

My thoughts seemed to take on just the right shape at just the right time—wouldn't this be a great way to transform our neighborhood? Music and the buzz of an open-air market! Actually, bringing some middle-class folks to our block would be good for the city. An honest enterprise that serves the working poor (farmers), provides healthy food, and revitalizes a neighborhood in the downtown core—sounds like something that lines up with the gospel fairly well.

In the end, inviting the farmers' market to our parking lot was easy for our congregation. There really seemed to be few drawbacks and several advantages. The congregation voted unanimously to move ahead with the plan.

The Details

The arrangements are fairly simple. We charge the market a small fee for the use of our parking lot, as well as for a shed where pop-up canopies and other market supplies can be stored during the season. First Covenant Church is given booth space at no



charge. The city health department requires the market to have a portable toilet available with a hand-washing station nearby. One area of the parking lot is designated for the market and the rest is used for parking.

When we started we said that our church building would not be available for vendors or customers. But we have developed such a strong partnership that we now use the building regularly to host cooking classes and demonstrations for the market.

Beyond these logistical issues, we established a few basic policies:

The partnership is not mutual. Together the church and the market determined that decisions regarding

what can be sold, which vendors are accepted, what fees booths will pay, and other market rules all belong exclusively to the market. First Covenant does not insert its opinion into these issues. The market belongs to the farmers. The church is there only as a vendor and as a supportive host.

Religious and political proclamations are not allowed. Our booth might indicate a religious or political stance, but no music, announcements, or other public broadcasts can include politics or religion.

Because the farmers had been frustrated by previous locations and arrangements they decided that the Spokane farmers' market would sell only locally grown plants, produce, and non-mass produced foods. Many markets include crafts and other goods to be sold. While our farmers have been open to this idea, thus far selling only food has worked well for them.

"High stalling" (buying something for a low price and selling it at a higher price) is not allowed. This precludes produce that is not locally grown and free giveaways that hurt other farmers.

Beyond these basics we simply stay in conversation and deal with issues case by case.

How It Works

On market days the vendors arrive at around 6:30 a.m. for setup. The booths are usually 10' x 10' but larger space is available for a fee. The market is open for business from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. The half-day schedule works because produce starts to wilt in the summer heat, not to mention the fact that farmers have other work to do.

There is always a friendly spirit of cooperation between the vendors during setup. Local musicians play music on market days. We have had Celtic and other folk music, bluegrass, blues, and jazz—most of it excellent. The music adds a festive spirit to the event and is a real draw for the market.

Recently one of the farmers told



Pastor Lawrence Hudson (pictured above) says the farmers' market has helped revitalize First Covenant Church's Spokane neighborhood.

me that before they started the Spokane farmers' market his retail sales that year amounted to \$300. He said this year they made \$80,000. Not all of that money goes to one person, but it does indicate that now they are making a living wage.

It is true that the market caters largely to the middle class, but together we have found ways around that. After a couple of years the farmers were frustrated that they couldn't do more to help the poor. A group

The farmers' market has changed our identity in the city. We used to be known as "the Swedish church on the corner." Now we are known as "the church with the farmers' market right across from Starbucks." In the ten years we have been hosting the market our visibility has grown, but the ministry has not been directly evangelistic. Most people don't notice the role of the church. A few are thankful, but people don't come to worship because of the market. Yes, we have put our



comprised of two community organizations, a market representative, and myself representing the church gathered together. We decided to start a voucher program. One of the community organizations donated \$1,500 for the vouchers, and the other provided personnel to distribute them. Soon we found ourselves working with WIC (Women, Infants and Children) and Meals on Wheels supplying vouchers for food. We were in a win-win-win scenario. The community organizations were serving their constituents, farmers were making money, the poor were being helped, and our neighborhood was the center of new vitality in the city. Today the business community is envious of the foot traffic the farmers' market generates.

address, phone number, and worship times on every label that accompanies our excellent Swedish coffee bread or bag of cookies. Yes, we have been friendly and even had conversations about faith issues with customers, but it has not changed our worship attendance.

Honest commerce, hard-working people helping an economically depressed population, and neighborhood revitalization are all great reasons for churches to link up with a farmers' market. But there is another reason that is important as well.

When a local flower grower first approached us on behalf of the farmers in 1998, he indicated that the farmers were frustrated. They had been moved from site to site trying

to set up a market, and almost every partnership they attempted had been hurtful to them. The reason? It seems that other partners and would-be hosts had ulterior motives (such as personal profit), and no one demonstrably cared about the farmers and their enterprise. Out of that frustration, they finally decided to develop a market on their own.

By now they have had many offers to relocate, but they always choose to stay with us because we don't have a hidden agenda. We help them with what they want to do. Christians know how to care about something other than themselves. We care about right things and every blessing God wants for our world. If that's what motivates a church, then the cooperation between that congregation and a farmers' market might just be a match made in heaven. ■

