

Mt. Zion-Linville: Keeping it Simple

Scriptural Focus: Colossians 3:15-17

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.



Mt. Zion-Linville

Photo by Dylan Bare

"Mt Zion is a Christ centered, family oriented, community focused congregation in Linville, [Virginia]" [Click here to learn more.](#)

Reflecting on the challenges of a growing congregation, Pastor Jonathan Prater declared yesterday, "I never would've dreamed 13 years ago when I was hired to be a halftime interim pastor that we would have two building expansions and so many people coming it created parking issues." Attendance at Mt. Zion-Linville has nearly tripled, and Prater attributes the growth to "Keeping it simple and just talking about Jesus."

When the church began to talk about growing, the congregation was not focused on attendance. Prater said, "We've learned that if you're aiming to grow the church, you're aiming at the wrong thing. If you aim to find Jesus, the growth will come. Attendance is not our end game."

Indeed, growth has come to Mt. Zion-Linville, and it took root when they started a children's ministry that met two Thursday nights a month. The program is led by Amy Hull, who Prater says, "has a real heart for the community." The congregation decided to focus on the relationship students in their community have with Jesus. There are over 30 children who come on any given Thursday night.

The program facilitated relationships, and from those relationships, other ministries were born. The fathers of these children began meeting in a men's group towards the end of the COVID era and have grown from those 3 to 4 members initially to six times that number. In fact, they held a men's retreat last weekend, and 18 men came.

The congregation has developed a heart for building community inside and outside its walls. Prater remarked, "We've grown to the point that we're trying to hold it all together in a time when there are so many divisions." He continued, "We've been able to create a sense of belonging where you can come and just worship Jesus without polarizing things." With growth comes new decisions. "We've had to adjust. We are looking at the building as well as the leadership structure," Prater stated. "We're trying to keep it simple and talk about Jesus and building community."

Young families are embracing the idea of community. “We’re watching the parents move towards parenting together,” Prater observed. The local AAU basketball team has eight members that are affiliated with Mt. Zion-Linville, including all five starters. “We’ve been able to return to the time where the church is becoming the center of social events again,” he said.

Mt. Zion-Linville is seeing through its people how God is providing for the challenges in growth. A major challenge is enough parking to accommodate the congregation. Prater is amazed at how concerned some members are about their fellow congregants. “I watch as large families park in a field across the street and walk 300-400 yards to the church.” Some of the parking spaces are farther away, and Prater said people are volunteering to park there so that older members will not have to walk so far.

Growth affects not only the building and parking lot but also changes how worship is planned. “We’re integrating our worship to accommodate a multi-generational church,” Prater said. He offered examples of this ministry integration: “A youth praise team has been formed and will be performing one Sunday each month. We are also allowing third through eighth-grade children to be the scripture readers, and the older women are stuffing the Easter eggs this week.” Diversity is more than meets the eye, as Prater notes, “We’re trying to cross the generational lines and are nurturing diversity.”

“I’m extremely humbled,” Prater admits, “it’s not about church growth, but about growing the care of the congregation.” With an emphasis on Jesus and building stronger community relationships, the long-term impacts are yet to come.

This article originally appeared in the Shenandoah District Church of the Brethren’s Shenandoah Update on March 29, 2023

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