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SMALL CHURCH AMERICA



PHOTO BY: ALETHIA WILLIAMS

SIMPLY CHURCH

A Rural New England Church Hosts Thursday Dinner Church

Historic churches dot the landscape of the quaint, picturesque town of Grafton, Mass. A bustling industrial village during the 18th and 19th centuries, the town about 30 miles west of Boston is mostly rural and sleepy now. And, typical of secular New England, residents no longer flock to the many white-steeped church buildings on Sundays.

But at the end of mile-long Potter Hill Road, beyond farmland and forest and the town square, is a 1960s house on five acres that abuts a small organic farm. It is here, of all places, that church is thriving again every Thursday night. “Church” means gathering in the home’s basement for a weekly dinner and worship.

Welcome to Simple Church.

“I think it’s really accessible to people to have essentially a Thanksgiving dinner every week, where we sit down and recognize that everything comes from God,” says Pastor Zach Kerzee, a young, energetic guy the United Meth-

SIMPLE CHURCH

Grafton, Mass.

Pastor: **Zach Kerzee**

Website: **SimpleUMC.com**

Founded: **2013**

Affiliation: **United Methodist Church**

Attendance: **40-45**

odist Church hired right out of seminary to plant a church in Grafton using seed money and a former parsonage with acreage left from a church closing.

“We don’t need all the trappings of a normal church to have church,” he says, “especially in New England, where many churches are in severe decline.”

Kerzee planted Simple Church in summer 2013 and held the launch service a year later, September 2014. He’s attracted most of the attendees by knocking on doors within a few miles. Though he often hears “no,” he’s still garnered interest.

“Most people I approach don’t go to church,” he says, “but I sense that people would go if they felt like church had something to offer.”

Simple Church appeals to Grafton’s secular population largely through its on-trend less-is-more approach and its partnership with the neighboring organic farm (the farmer’s apprentice is on the church plant team). When Kerzee isn’t clearing brush around the parsonage, he’s trading labor on the farm for the produce he harvests every Thursday morning to prepare the meal later that day. He hopes to eventually cultivate the church’s own land.

The unusual model for Simple Church is Kerzee’s answer to the United Methodist Church’s campaign to “Rethink Church.”

“What I’ve seen of new churches doesn’t really look all that different from church as usual,” he says. “We are really going to have to think of some creative ways to break away from that model if we’re going to be relevant in a post-Christian society.”

Simple Church peels away the layers of “typical” church services to create what Kerzee says resembles early Christians’ worship services inside believers’ homes, as described in Acts 2:42-47.

Still, they retain a minimalist liturgy. They begin each service by observing communion. The group breaks the bread Kerzee baked that morning and lights candles. They serve dinner, Kerzee gives a short sermon and reads Scripture to start conversation, and they sing worship songs. Finally, they take communion juice and pray. An hour and a half later, it’s over.

Simple Church’s Thursday night meals have welcomed people of all ages, and even unbelievers.

“This is such a different model and such a nonjudgmental environment,” Kerzee says. “I think people generally feel very comfortable when they come because of that.”

—Jessica Hanewinckel