

NATHAN CARLSON: CALLED TO START A NEW CHURCH IN WASHINGTON, PA.

Nathan Carlson '11 is pursuing a specific call he's felt for nearly a decade—a call to start a new church along the Route 19 corridor north of Washington, Pa. As a United Methodist church plant, The Heights (starting out of The Meadowbrook Heights Community) is beginning along the cell-church model.

"It's going to be a while before we have worship services as many will recognize them," Nathan says, but "we are committed to being in relational and missional community groups who see transformation begin in the lives of individuals before we gather together in large group celebrations of worship." A new approach for churches in this UMC conference, the cell-group model also focuses on leadership development in its transformational, evangelistic mission.



Nathan first felt called to this ministry while he was completing his undergraduate degree in Business Administration at Washington and Jefferson College. "As I witnessed many new housing developments springing up along the Route 19 corridor, I felt deep down that someone should start a new church specifically to reach the families that would be moving into them," he notes. After several conversations with the Bishop of the Annual Conference, Nathan was more convinced than ever of the need for such a church.

"I witnessed quite a few church starts fail in the area, and they did so largely for two reasons: lack of a unique vision that meaningfully intersected with the lives of the individuals in the community, and a serious lack of funding." So Nathan felt called to tackle the task himself. After much time and many conversations, Nathan's diligent pursuit got the attention of the UMC Annual Conference leaders, who recognized the need for Nathan's call to be expressed concretely. "We are just at the beginning of the process, but we are committed to offering something different, and our Conference has been gracious enough to provide three years of support for this venture," Nathan celebrates.

"There were two extremely positive experiences in seminary that confirmed the calling in my life to church planting," he says. The first was a World Mission Initiative trip to Brazil, where he saw a cell church being planted, another one in the middle of growth, and a third that had blossomed into thousands of believers. The second was his mission professor's continual emphasis on enculturation of the church, so that new disciples multiply indigenously.

Nathan is convinced that new-church planters must be initiators with a clear vision for who they are trying to reach with the gospel. "You can't just rely on being sent to plant a church," he says. "Most successful church plants are started by people who, like Paul when he went to Macedonia, simply can't ignore their calling to a particular people." Fortunately for the people of The Heights, Nathan couldn't ignore his.

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