



THE Common Language OF SOCCER

How two congregations, working together, reached out to their diverse community.

**Linda Gustafson
and Sandy Malley**

A mission field in our own backyard” took on a literal meaning when Redeemer Covenant Church in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, turned its seldom-used softball diamond into a popular soccer field last summer.

Brooklyn Park, a second-ring suburb of Minneapolis, has an increasingly multicultural population of nearly 76,000, and soccer is a common denominator among the varied ethnicities represented in the area. A deep desire to reach outside church walls and meet their neighbors led the church to host its first soccer camp for local children and their families last summer.

The origins of the camp actually go back a couple years, to the fall of 2008, when a local pastor contacted Redeemer Covenant to ask a favor. A new Spanish-speaking Covenant church plant, La Bendición, was looking for a place to host a church dinner on Thanksgiv-

ing Day. Could they hold it at Redeemer?

At the time Steve Larson, Redeemer’s pastor, had already been praying for two years for opportunities to reach out to the growing population of Latino families in their community. The leadership team at Redeemer was also receptive to the idea, so they welcomed La Bendición into their facility for Thanksgiving dinner.

That was the beginning of a partnership between the two congregations, which eventually led La Bendición to move to Redeemer, a location that was more central to where many Latino families live and work. Both congregations have flourished through opportunities to share worship, fellowship, service together in the community, and outreach in the name of Christ.

La Bendición’s pastor, Juan Lopez, recognized the possibilities of creating a soccer program both as an outreach to the neighbor-

hood children and as a way to involve families within his own congregation. Maribel Benavides and Santos Gonzalez and their children were the first family to come to La Bendición. Benavides was quite active in the church, but Gonzalez was not. Lopez knew that Gonzalez had been a professional soccer player in Ecuador, so he shared his idea with Gonzalez for inviting neighborhood children to come play soccer in Redeemer's field. Gonzalez became excited by the idea and volunteered to be one of the coaches.

Conversation ensued regarding a joint summer soccer camp. Some members of the Redeemer congregation had been suggesting for a few years that the church purchase soccer goals and set them up on the unused softball field. The idea began to take hold among both congregations, and they prayed together for God's blessing.

Creating a Program

Plans for the program quickly fell into place. Kickin' Kids Soccer Camp would be offered on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from mid-June through mid-August. It would be free

and available to kids between the ages of six and fifteen.

Four coaches—two from each congregation—volunteered to lead the camp. From La Bendición came Gonzalez and Lopez, who had learned to play soccer in his native Colombia. And from Redeemer were Kenny Oyederu, a certified soccer coach and physical education teacher who came to America from Nigeria sixteen years ago, and Keith Weiman, a longtime member of the church who had played soccer as a child in the United States.

Support from the two congregations was strong. Within two Sundays, they had donated enough money for the goals, nets, and field-marking equipment.

The next step was to get the word out to the neighborhood. They created brochures in English and Spanish, which they passed out door-to-door, and mailed to children who had previously attended church programs. They distributed brochures at Second Harvest, where both congregations work alongside other area churches to distribute food products to those in the community, and they advertised the camp at Redeemer's booth at

Brooklyn Park's annual city celebration, Tater Daze (named in honor of the potato fields on which the city is built). Volunteers at the booth asked if passersby would like to hear about a free soccer program. Some families signed up right away.

On the first evening of the camp, the staff was unsure what to expect. They had taken care of all the details. The coaching staff set up goals and the facilities staff marked the white game lines. Balls were inflated to the right pressure, and the water jug was filled and perched on the coach's pickup tailgate with plastic cups ready for water breaks. Information sheets and registration forms were available in both English and Spanish, and the first aid kit was handy.

Everything was prepared. The field was ready. Would anyone come?

When twenty children showed up, the staff was thrilled. Through word of mouth, attendance more than doubled after that, with about fifty children on the field each succes-

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Reflecting the growing diversity of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, Kickin' Kids Soccer Camp is connecting two congregations to their community.



Assistant coach Mazzinic Duo and his daughter Cassie Dahn are from Liberia.

Hosting on the Sidelines

Much more happened in the soccer camp than kicking, dribbling, and passing the ball on the field. While the coaches and assistants concentrated on the players, hospitality team members connected with parents and family members on the sidelines. They warmly greeted everyone, registered new children, provided water, and directed individuals to a portable restroom that was wheelchair accessible.

Russ Nelson, a member of Redeemer, wanted to do his part by arriving at every session with a friendly smile as he set up tables and supplies and interacted with players and their families.

“I think soccer is a great way for kids of different nationalities to learn to play together and learn a new skill at the same time,” Nelson

brought by adults who often stay and watch, so we engage them in casual conversation as we offer information about additional events and programs for children.”

The hospitality team passed out information about upcoming vacation Bible school, AWANA, and children’s events offered by Redeemer and La Bendición throughout the rest of the year. Most of the material was published in both English and Spanish.

“I met women who were so happy to come and be where there were both English- and Spanish-speaking people,” Williams says. “One woman was English-speaking but her mother-in-law spoke only Spanish. Among those of us doing hospitality, we could talk to them both.”

The coaches had a great time teaching each other how soccer is

sive session. Many children brought friends who rode to camp on their bicycles. By the end of the summer, the roster listed the names of eighty-five soccer players.

At each session the coaches took attendance and the camp started with prayer and a short devotional. The kids were divided into two groups—six- to ten-year-olds in one group, and eleven- to fifteen-year-olds in the other. They practiced on different parts of the same field, so it became a bit crowded sometimes. They learned soccer skills, concentrating on just a few skills at a time. They also learned to get along with each other. “After each clinic we would think of a word like *love* or *respect* and ask the kids what that word meant to them,” says Weiman. Such dialogue gave the coaching staff a chance to emphasize the character qualities of good sportsmanship.

Uniforms were not required, but t-shirts were available if players wanted to buy one. Sometimes they divided into teams to scrimmage, but no score keeping was allowed.

When bad weather forced cancellations, families were notified by a pre-arranged text message system and a notice was posted on the church’s sign near the road. Coaches also waited at the field to be sure to communicate to parents who did not get the message.



The camp curriculum includes time to talk about sportsmanship.

says. “There is way too much hatred and violence among the nations today. If we can just learn to get along in this troubled world, it will be a much better place to live. I think starting with our kids—this is a small step in the right direction.”

Karen Williams, church corporate secretary with a heart for family ministry, adds, “I believe the hospitality piece is strategic in making this an outreach ministry. The players are

played in other countries. The Latino coaches were amazed at how the Nigerian coach and some of the African assistants and campers always played without their shoes. Though impressed with the agility and game skills of the shoeless players, no one wanted to try it until the end of the season when the Nigerians finally convinced their teammates to try playing barefoot, all in good fun.

Huddle time for participants in this summer's program

Reviewing Results

The soccer camp was a successful program on many levels. Several parents in the community work two or three jobs, Lopez says, and their children spend a lot of time watching television. The camp provided incentive for fun outdoor exercise and building skills together with friends.

"I met one woman who said this program was an answer to prayer because her girls were too shy to enter a fully organized program but still desired to play soccer," says Williams. "Another woman told me her son wanted to play but they could not afford the larger programs."

The camp also touched the lives of the staff. Three of Coach Oyederu's four children participated in the program. He says they loved having him with them on the field as they were introduced to Nigeria's national sport. "I've always been a very busy dad," he explains, "so taking the summer off to do God's work and having time for my family made a difference in my family life and relationships."

The enthusiasm Coach Gonzalez showed for teaching soccer to neighborhood children expanded to enthusiasm for Sunday afternoon church services at La Bendición. Now every time the church doors are open, Gonzalez is there. And two new families that were involved in the camp have started attending La Bendición regularly.

Enhancing the Future

This summer the church has expanded the camp to include three- to five-year-olds for a half-hour at the beginning of each evening of camp. Age-group levels meet consecutively rather than all at once to relieve the congestion on the field. More players this season means more volunteers are needed, so the church began recruiting coaches and hospitality team members early. A regular fifteen-minute devotional



tailored for each age group is incorporated into the evening's schedule.

This year participants have paid a small fee for the camp (\$10 per child or \$25 per family). Camp staff recognized that players are more committed to consistent attendance if the family has invested something in the program. With the registration fee, each player receives a team t-shirt.

Redeemer's "adopted" neighborhood elementary school (where the church supports students with school supplies and winter wear and volunteers in the classroom, as well as a potluck meal for staff on student-parent conference nights) was so excited to hear about the soccer program that they asked if they could send home flyers with every student. As a result, registration filled up completely in the two younger age groups after one week of registration, and soon there was a waiting list for the ten- to fifteen-year-olds as well. Most exciting was the fact that two-thirds of the participants this summer do not attend either Redeemer or La Bendición.

"Redeemer Covenant Church is striving to be a community learning compassion and worship that is centered on Christ," says Pastor Larson. "The joint soccer program with La Bendición created an appreciation between the congregations as we began to learn more about each other. Through the strength of our

work together, we compassionately engaged the community that is so close to our door."

Jesus says in John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." With that in mind, Redeemer and La Bendición seek to be a place of light and warmth in a difficult world, providing fun along the way through ministries like Kickin' Kids Soccer Camp. ■

Creating Your Own Soccer Ministry

- Surround the vision, planning, and implementation with prayer.
- Be sure the church pastor, congregation, and community share the goal and recognize the need.
- Find coaches and assistants with Christian commitment, skills, and dedication.
- Make financial needs known so others can have the joy of contributing.
- Produce attractive church promotional materials to distribute in neighborhood.
- Translate materials into additional languages if necessary.
- Develop an ample hospitality team to host the players' families on the sidelines and initiate intentional conversations.
- Monitor and reflect, so next summer can be even better as improvements are identified and implemented.