

# Northern Illinois Conference 2023 One Matters Award

*Urban Village Church*

*Chicago, IL – Lake North*



Many churches, of course, have had to adjust in innumerable ways to post-pandemic life, including how we incorporate baptism into the life of our community. The pandemic certainly caused a decrease in the number of baptisms we have had at Urban Village Church and also \*how\* we baptize has been affected, too. These reflections from our Wicker Park site pastor Juan Pablo Herrera give a good overview of some of the ways we've had to change connecting with people:

We offer a "Starting Point" class where new people can come and learn about the three kinds of grace in our lives, as well as hear how Urban Village Church lives out our mission of creating Jesus-loving, inclusive communities that ignite the city. We changed the class from a 6-week class to a one day get together. Every couple of months I host a Starting Point lunch at my house and invite newcomers to come and enjoy a time of fellowship, food, prayer, and study, making it more casual and conversational.

Although we get people that come to UVC by word of mouth and come from other churches looking for a more progressive faith community, most people I have met over the last six months as pastor of our Wicker Park site are new to Christianity. On Mother's Day we baptized three such people during our service. Laura and Michelle are sisters who found us through a Google



search. These women were looking for a nearby church whose theological theory and theological practices aligned with their own sense of morals and ethics. I met with them over several weeks before they attended their first service. The third person baptized was Taylinn who is an 18-year-old trans woman who lives in a transitional home a block from our location and googled "gay church". Taylinn has been a regular attendee and volunteers to read scripture on Sunday mornings. She did not grow up in a religious home but was looking for a community to belong to after being rejected by her family when she began her transition. The three of them did not know that baptism was an option for them. We had to come up with new strategies for unchurched visitors, especially young people.

One strategy was to use content that is more accessible and tailored to the younger generation with messages of faith meant to reach them. This included changing words like "confession" to "telling the truth about yourself," and "holy ritual" to "sacred tradition or

ceremony.” In addition, we explained the practice of pouring or sprinkling for baptism as a valid option that they had not heard of before for adults. For Michelle and Robyn, our worship team surrounded them during their baptism and prayed over them to create a more intimate experience for them. Finally, for Taylinn we included a name change ceremony as part of her baptism to welcome her into our community as her authentic self, including sponsors who presented her with a Bible with her new name and another trans person to serve her communion afterwards.

The efforts have not been in vain and were done collaboratively with others in our congregation. We have seen encouraging results from our strategies; we received a lot of positive feedback from current members of the church who appreciate that we are adjusting to the new realities of reaching young people. We also had a few other new people reach out asking about baptism for themselves. These issues are complex and require a lot of work to fix. But I believe that through teamwork and collaboration, we can make a difference in our churches and communities. By working together, anything is possible!