

Church's money giveaway: Alsip pastor's cash prizes fill pews

Minister's focus is to help congregation pay bills and begin a debt-free life



In Alsip, the Rev. Dan Willis holds a box with cash that he gives to lucky worshippers at his services (Tribune photo by Zbigniew Bzdak / October 28, 2009)

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At Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip, the congregation can get more than just prayer at the Sunday worship services.

If a lucky -- or "blessed and highly favored" -- churchgoer is in the right seat, they can also receive a cash prize.

At each of the three Sunday services, the Rev. Dan Willis pulls a number of one seat from a bag and the worshiper in that seat wins a cash prize. Two of the churchgoers win \$250 and the third gets \$500. The church gives away \$1,000 each Sunday, Willis said.

The cash prize is part of Willis' recent focus on helping his congregation pay bills and begin a debt-free life, he said.

"We've had sooooo many of our people displaced from jobs, facing foreclosure," he said. "When people's faith was high, their debt was down. When their faith was down, their debt was high. I realized the two are connected."

Willis concedes the cash prize is a gimmick to fill the pews. But he's unapologetic about the plan, because it's working. On a typical Sunday, his church draws about 1,600 people to its three Sunday services. But since the money giveaway started, about five weeks ago, the congregation has grown to about 2,500 each week, he said. The money for the giveaway comes from the church offering. Lighthouse is a non-denominational church.

"If I can get someone in here and teach them and give them money, that's what I'm going to do," he said.

As part of the lessons, Willis set up a shredder near the pulpit to encourage church members to shred their credit cards and commit to stop spending. He talks about budgeting, tackling past-due bills and saving. He encourages the prize winners to use the money to pay down their bills, rather than splurge on new items. One Sunday, he gave away 15 savings accounts with \$25 already in them. And he had bank representatives at the service so church members could set up accounts.

"The Bible says even an ant stores up in the summer so it can live in the winter," Willis said. "Even an ant can teach us. Even an ant knows how to save. We, with intellect, don't know how to do it. When people see that in Scripture, it takes on a whole different level."

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