

Bottled and sold: A church's recycling mission

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [March 6, 2013](#) issue



Photo courtesy of Kyle Childress

We live in the reddest part of Texas, a very red state. It's so conservative that recycling is viewed as a form of socialism or even a kind of anti-Christian humanism, because, as some see it, our Christian duty is to use up the earth's resources as rapidly as possible in order to hasten the coming again of the Lord Jesus. So I suppose we shouldn't have been surprised when our city decided to discontinue its curbside recycling program three years ago and discontinue the glass recycling

completely. As usual these days, the criterion is not the public good but whether or not a profit can be made.

Members of our own small congregation, Austin Heights Baptist Church, have been activists and participants in environmental projects of one kind or another for years. We're the tree-hugging church (or the socialist or communist church, the nigger-loving church, the gay church or—worst epithet in our part of the world—the liberal church) that is usually denigrated and labeled and dismissed. Personally, I think of us as the stubborn church, because being in the minority rarely seems to faze us. Nevertheless, it is a constant challenge to figure out ways to be heard, to make a witness, when we don't have majority power.

Church members wrote letters, spoke at city council meetings, organized, lobbied and agitated in various ways about the recycling issue, all to no avail. About the same time, one of our small groups was sitting around the dinner table one night after doing a study on food and faith and started brainstorming about the two wine bottles in front of them (OK, we're also the drinking church). What did God want us to do? How could we reduce the glass going into our local landfill and repurpose it for something else?

One of the church members got his hands on some glass-cutting equipment, a glass saw and a polisher and started experimenting with cutting wine bottles into various items—bird feeders, wind chimes, drinking glasses, candleholders, etc. One thing led to another and others joined in. Soon a dozen or more church members were getting together once a week to clean, cut and polish wine bottles to make all sorts of items. They set up a booth at the local farmers' market (also an effort that grew out of our church) and sold what they made, with the proceeds going to our local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity (another effort that grew out of our church).

In a little over two years they've sold \$12,000 worth of recycled glass, with all the money going to Habitat. Word spread, and restaurants and people from all over town began bringing us not only their empty wine bottles but all sorts of glass. On Monday mornings we were finding boxes upon boxes of empty wine, whiskey and beer bottles stacked outside the door of our church. The town naysayers said, "See, I told you they were the drinking church!"

Overwhelmed by all the bottles, we discovered a company in the Dallas area that agreed to pick up our excess glass once a month and recycle it into fiberglass. We

also shifted our collection point to the Habitat office. A statewide syndicated television program sent a crew to film a story on our glass adventure, and soon we were receiving calls from all over Texas asking for tours, training and advice on how others could do the same thing in their city. Recently the same video footage was picked up on a national cable channel, and now we're getting phone calls from Indiana, Ohio and Arkansas. We've also had inquiries from our own city asking us how we're recycling the glass.

Nearly 70 years ago theologian John C. Bennett said the church should be "an ethical laboratory . . . to push further in the realization of Christian goals for human life than can be done in society at large." Orner Baptist prophet Will Campbell used to remind the church of its "pioneering edge"—we are to get out front and try things the wider society is reluctant to try. John Yoder liked to talk about the "modeling mission" of the minority-minded church where we can undertake "pilot programs" that the wider society deems unimportant.

Our own small church has a long history of starting up ministries that grew and invited wider participation until they became self-sustaining. In addition to the local Habitat affiliate and the farmers' market, we started a work center for people with disabilities that eventually became part of our regional mental health agency, as well as a local AIDS agency that outgrew us and is now an independent agency. Granted, we also have a long history of ministries that ran out of steam, were larger than we could manage or simply failed. Indeed, we have a much longer history of failure than we do of success. But as a minority church without social power we have a certain freedom: we can afford to experiment and risk trying new things more easily than those who are defined by thinking that they're in charge of society.

From our beginning 45 years ago we've been a small church swimming against the stream of the wider culture. Though often beset by the twin temptations of exhaustion and despair on the one hand and pride stemming from thinking we're the faithful remnant on the other, at our best we are learning to trust the power of weakness. Being small and outnumbered has forced us to learn to think differently, to be creative and imaginative. And while, like the parable of the persistent widow, we keep banging on Caesar's door calling for justice, we have learned that there is a weakness in having power. We could be too big, too influential or too wealthy to do what God calls us to do.

For now, we keep gathering every week to clean, cut and polish bottles into interesting items for sale at the farmers' market, and my wine-drinking church

members now buy wine not according to vintage but by whether or not the labels are easy to remove during the cleaning process. Word spreads, a ministry grows, glass is recycled, donations to Habitat increase and a witness is made to the God who calls us to care for the earth and our neighbors.