



Mission Alabama

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Shelby Baptist Association Ministers Through Christmas Gift Shop

By Sammie Jo Barstow, Freelance Writer

Imagine Christmas morning with no toys, no new clothes, no red stockings stuffed with goodies, no popcorn or cookies. For many families, that scene is a reality. Parents struggling with job loss, disability, or simply not enough income to provide for bills, much less extras, may anticipate Christmas as simply one more insurmountable burden. But churches in Shelby Baptist Association recognized this need many years before the current economic downturn and determined to help parents in need during the Christmas season.

"No Room at the Inn" is the theme for the 2009 Christmas Gift Shop, a ministry of the 72 churches and missions of Shelby Baptist Association. In 1995, associational leaders envisioned providing toys, clothes, and other Christmas items for needy families, but they had something more in mind. Their ultimate goal was to share Jesus. "Christmas Gift Shop is an intentional evangelistic ministry to parents," said Debbie Snyder, NAMB Missionary and Church Ministries Development Director for Shelby Association.

Although Christmas Gift Shop now involves thousands of volunteers each year, many of whom work year around to provide for hundreds of children, the main mission remains the same. Every parent who receives assistance from the ministry also hears the Gospel.

Under the direction of Jo Bailey, coordinator of the ministry since its inception, a task force plans and implements hundreds of details in preparation for the opening of the Christmas Gift Shop around the end of November. Each member of the task force is responsible for one facet of the ministry. More than 500 core volunteers help with particular assignments.

"We set the stage for people to be ready to hear the Gospel when they come to Christmas Gift Shop," said Snyder. "We want every detail to be special. We want parents to know that God loves them, and we believe the tone we set, the atmosphere, and the preparation that has gone into welcoming them as guests to the Christmas Gift Shop will be used by God to soften their hearts to hear His message."

Beginning in September, parents are interviewed to determine need. They are required to bring Social Security cards for everyone in the family, proof of 9-1-1 location, as well as pertinent information about income and expenses. After being qualified, parents provide a list of suggested toys and clothing sizes for each child. The parent is then given an appointment time for a shopping trip through the Christmas Gift Shop.

When a guest arrives for a Christmas shopping appointment, they are greeted by a hostess and introduced to a "buddy" who accompanies them on their shopping trip. Every room in the shop is beautifully decorated. Snyder says churches, Sunday school classes, GA or Women on Mission groups, as well as individuals and businesses, enthusiastically accept the responsibility of decorating rooms and providing gifts and clothing.

The first stop is the "Mantel Room" where the parent sees handmade Christmas stockings personalized for their children hanging on the mantel. Each stocking is stuffed with small gifts, such as shampoo, toothpaste and toothbrushes, pens, pencils, and candy. Next are the rooms containing new toys and new clothes. For each child, the parent will receive three toys (according to their previous requests), three items of clothing, as well as three sets of socks and underwear. In addition, each family is given a tin of popcorn and a box of homemade cookies.

"The relief we see on the faces of parents who know their children's Christmas has been provided is worth all the work," according to Snyder.

But their visit is not complete until they visit the “buddy room.” Each guest is taken by their assigned buddy to a small room where they are served coffee or apple cider and homemade cookies. If they don’t have a Bible, one is provided for them to take home, and every year a special gift is given. It may be a Bible, a CD, a book, or another similar gift.

The parent’s buddy then offers the supreme Christmas gift – the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. When parents make decisions during that time, local churches follow up with visits or phone calls inviting them to church. “Much of the time we don’t actually know the full outcome of this ministry,” said Snyder.

But that was not the case with Jane*. Her husband, previously an excellent provider for the family, became ill and unable to work. Jane had to reduce the number of hours she worked in order to take care of her family. They were struggling to pay bills, and there was no money for Christmas, a situation their family had never faced before. When Jane visited the Christmas Gift Shop, Snyder shared the Gospel and Jane prayed to receive Christ as her Savior.

“The truth is that I had no way of knowing what really happened in her heart that day. I was fearful that she had so much going on in her life that I didn’t know whether this decision was real or not,” said Snyder. But the next year, shortly before Christmas, she got an answer to that question.

“Someone knocked on the back door. When Jo Bailey answered, it was Jane. We invited her in. She stretched out her hand to Jo and in it was a rolled up one hundred dollar bill,” said Snyder.

“You helped me last year when I needed help so much,” said Jane. “Now I want to be able to help someone else.”

When Bailey took Jane around the clinic, they paused at one of the “buddy rooms.” “You can decorate this room any way you want,” said Jane, “but it will always be the most beautiful room to me because this is where I received Christ.” “That story still melts my heart,” said Snyder.

Christmas Gift Shop began as a small outreach to a few families in 1995, but in 2008 more than 800 children were served. A church or association desiring to replicate this ministry may not be able to have such a large impact immediately, but Snyder and Bailey encourage them to start with a few families and build each year, making sure the main ministry is to introduce families to the Savior. Anyone interested in knowing more about Christmas Gift Shop is invited to attend their Open House on November 15th, from 2:00 – 4:00 p.m. at 1819 18th Street in Calera, Alabama.

“The toy gifts will tear up in a week or two, the clothing gifts will become too small, but the gift of Jesus Christ will last for eternity,” said Jo Bailey. “What better gift could a family have than Daddy or Mother bringing Jesus home for Christmas?”

Prayer Requests

- Pray that many people will be saved during this Christmas season.
- Pray for the thousands of volunteers it takes to make Christmas Gift Shop a reality.
- Pray for Jo Bailey, coordinator of the Christmas Gift Shop. Pray for her health and stamina during this crucial period of preparation.
- Pray that people will rise to the anticipated challenge of the many additional parents who will need the ministry of the Christmas Gift Shop.

Ways You Can Be Involved

- Prayer support is crucial during the weeks of preparation and ministry.
- Work with your Association to begin a similar ministry in your area.
- Contact local ministries in your area or DHR to adopt a family at Christmas.
- Your gifts through the Cooperative Program help to fund NAMB Missionaries.

*not her real name