

Church hopes other churches adopt Operation Inasmuch to minister to the 'least of these'_122004

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FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. (ABP)—Ten years ago, Snyder Memorial Baptist Church in Fayetteville, N.C., was a church ready for a new challenge. To revitalize the congregation, staff members envisioned a brief local-missions blitz with the ambitious goal of involving more than half of the people attending Sunday morning services.

What resulted was a one-day effort to minister to "the least of these" in and around Fayetteville, a military town. Blending military and biblical terminology, they called the project "Operation Inasmuch," taking inspiration from Jesus' parable in Matthew 25.

The first event drew 450 participants from the church—two-thirds of the average Sunday attendance.

"The day after, ... some members came to me and said, 'That's our idea of missions,'" recalled David Crocker, at the time the church's new pastor. "Operation Inasmuch became the heart of the church's mission statement. It changed the identity of the church in the community. From that point on, the church was sold on it."

So, apparently, were a lot of others.

A decade later, more than 300 churches representing many denominations now participate, as the idea has spread from North Carolina into Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, and even across the Atlantic. Burton Latimer Baptist Church in England held an Operation Inasmuch last year.

"When you start something like this," Crocker said, "you have no idea where it's going."

People of all ages gravitate toward expressing their concern for missions in local and personal ways, he noted. "They want hands-on involvement," he said.

Operation Inasmuch attempts to get church members outside of the church and into the community. But it's not about church image. "It's about doing what Jesus said," Crocker explained. "It's practicing what we say we believe. I grow weary of how often we gather in comfortable places and talk about doing missions. And I know that when you offer a way to do missions, laypeople in particular are very enthusiastic about it."

An event last spring in Knoxville, Tenn., where Crocker now is pastor of Central Baptist Church in Fountain City, included Presbyterians and Methodists and provided hands-on missions activities for almost all age groups.

That is a key to involvement, said Martha Johnson, a registered nurse who has been Central's volunteer coordinator for three Operation Inasmuch efforts.

During the April event, children in the church were part of a pizza party given for guests at a Ronald McDonald House, which offers temporary housing for families of ill children. The church children also packed personal-care kits that were distributed to people in local homeless shelters. Senior adults participated in light assembly projects.

Other church members prepared and froze 112 casseroles for the Fellowship Center, another organization that houses out-of-town families of local hospital patients. Central sponsored a baby shower, with all gifts donated to a home for unwed mothers. They prepared 500 "compassion bags." Each item inside had a Bible verse attached. Church members sorted food and clothes that had been donated to the Fountain City Ministry Center, an interdenominational project of eight churches housed at Central Baptist.

Youth and adults, working under the direction of project leaders, completed 20 construction-related projects during the one-day event, including painting, roofing, landscaping and installation of a wheelchair ramp in a home.

Even when construction is involved, the costs are kept to a minimum, Crocker said. It's often possible to partner with local groups that are "pass-through organizations" for projects funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"HUD makes money available to almost every community in the nation for repair of resident-owned property for people who are unable to do the repairs themselves," Crocker said. "These organizations are looking for volunteers. Our proposal is: 'You provide the materials. We provide the

volunteers."

The Operation Inasmuch churches provide lunches for all participating volunteers. And churches must purchase items to be used in the personal-care kits. But the average out-of-pocket cost for Central Baptist for an Operation Inasmuch with approximately 500 volunteers is only \$3,000. "So often people are willing to donate things," Crocker said. "Lots of businesses are eager to help out when they understand what this is."

In many Operation Inasmuch projects, those ministering and those ministered to are in direct contact. Does this then become an evangelism effort? And, Crocker was asked, how do you keep the recipients from feeling patronized?

In home-repair projects, volunteers are asked to take time to visit with homeowners, get to know them, share with them, and pray with and for them. Operation Inasmuch gives homeowners a Bible with the names of the volunteers listed inside.

"While volunteers are putting on a new roof, other volunteers are meeting and talking with the owners," Crocker said. "We do ask volunteers to inquire about their spiritual situation and, to whatever extent they will allow, to share with them. But we don't want it done in a heavy-handed way."

Operation Inasmuch has contributed to church growth at Central Baptist. "We've had people join the church because they were impressed that people would do such things," Crocker said.

But public relations and church growth are not the goals of Operation Inasmuch, Johnson emphasized.

"You have to be careful about the image you want to project," she said. "We don't want to imply that we're doing something that nobody else is doing."

"It's not an opportunity to brag about your church. It should be done more quietly than that. It's an opportunity to know that our church has a presence in the community. And people know that we are out there helping other people. Not that it's something great. It's just something that we are supposed to do. With just a little bit of effort," she said, "you can help a lot of people."

A manual for Operation Inasmuch is available for a nominal charge from the ministry's website, www.operationinasmuch.com.

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