

Waco church for homeless inspires others

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About 20 Lexington, Ky.,-area churches, including six congregations in the Kentucky Baptist Convention, have helped conduct services for homeless people inspired by Waco's Church Under The Bridge.

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By Ken Walker

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LEXINGTON, Ky.—The Church Under the Bridge in the Lexington, Ky., serves the same type of homeless and low-income people as a Waco congregation that inspired it—even though the Kentucky congregation never has met under a bridge.

Attracting from 200 to 400 people to Sunday afternoon services, the group recently marked its second anniversary.

Jimmy Dorrell, pastor of the original [Church Under the Bridge in Waco](#), was excited to learn that another congregation is using the same name. In addition to the original in Waco, others are in Austin and San Antonio.

“That’s encouraging,” said Dorrell of [Mission Waco](#), an adjunct professor at Baylor University and Truett Theological Seminary. “It’s the multiplication of the church to reach the ones we often exclude. I wish there were hundreds. The model is easy. It just means caring for people.”

About 20 Lexington-area churches, including six congregations in the Kentucky Baptist Convention, have helped conduct services.

“It’s really a neat ministry,” said Brian Harris, a member of Central Baptist Church in nearby Winchester, Ky. “A good percentage are homeless, and another percentage are not totally mentally competent, but all blend together well.”

Coordinator Allison Johnston said its vision is to serve the spiritual, physical

and emotional needs of the homeless and marginally housed.

“We believe that the love of Jesus will be seen through our services,” Johnson said.

The inspiration for Lexington’s Church Under the Bridge originated with Stella Kidd, a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Lexington.

Kidd acknowledges she was alarmed after her daughter, Chrissi Stevens, enrolled at Baylor in 2002 and called later to say she had found a church home. The problem was where the group met—under an Interstate 35 bridge near campus.

“I thought: ‘She’s going to church with all the drunks. This can’t be safe,’” Kidd recalled.

However, after visiting her daughter two months later and attending services, Kidd changed her mind.

“It was overwhelming to see the love of Jesus in action,” Kidd said. “It was wonderful to see people do whatever it takes to take the love of Jesus to people so they can see it.”

After returning to Lexington, Kidd—co-owner of a photo studio—showed pictures of the unconventional church to her office manager. That sparked discussions about how they could start a similar effort.

Those conversations led to the formation of a four-member steering committee. Each discussed their vision with members of their home church and gathered support.

In 2004, the first service was held at a YMCA. It has since shifted a couple times and currently meets on the front lawn of the Episcopal diocese downtown.

When the weather turns cooler this fall, services will move to a nearby elementary school.

The steering committee also recruited various churches to help put on services and serve the meal that follows. The response has demonstrated the project's appeal.

"I have yet to find a minister who's come who says, 'I'm not interested in coming back,'" Kidd said.

Stevens, who visited the church during college breaks, calls the Lexington outreach "really exciting," saying it enables her mother to put her social work degree to good use.

"She's been able to meet the needs of the congregation as well as take the love of God to needy people groups," said Stevens, who graduated in May and is working as a nurse in Columbia, S.C.

The Waco ministry made a long-term impact on Stevens, who said she had never been exposed to ministry to the homeless prior to Church Under the Bridge.

After moving to Dallas to complete her nursing degree, Stevens and her husband, Matthew, became active at Inner City Baptist Church. She said both experiences will be useful when they head overseas to do mission work as part of her husband's studies for a master of divinity degree.

"In each culture overseas, we're going to be contextualizing our ministry to meet the needs of those groups," Stevens said. "God has given us some wonderful exposure in developing those skills."

Although the services in Lexington feature Baptist-style invitations to accept Christ as Lord and Savior, organizers haven't tracked conversions.

Still, Kidd knows they have made an impact on many parishioners. She

cites one woman who has enrolled in night school and a man with a master's degree who has left the streets and is helping other homeless people.

Another formerly homeless man also turned his life around.

"He's serving burgers at McDonald's, and you'd think he was president of the United States," Kidd said. "He's so proud he has a job and his own place to live."

One of the biggest strides is extending a welcoming hand to people who have been rejected so often they are wary of others, Kidd said.

"God is using a lot of (volunteers) to help these people feel loved," Kidd said.

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