

Continuous ministry key to transforming neighborhood

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Former Hardin-Simmons University students Lindsey Snodgrass (left) and Cassie Cash help decorate a Friendship House designed to bring a community together. (HSU Photo)

Continuous ministry key to transforming neighborhood

By John Hall

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ABILENE—Two years ago, Hardin-Simmons University called Danyel and Brandon Rogers to a special task—transform a neighborhood.

After moving into the community and building relationships with their neighbors, they started ministry programs for children and mothers.

Months before the couple moved into a remodeled home provided by the university, which the school calls a Friendship House, the Rogerses began walking the neighborhood, meeting people who were working in their front yards.

After moving into the community and building relationships with their new neighbors, they started ministry programs for children and mothers. Hardin-Simmons officials re-cruited students to help them and organized neighborhood clean-up days.

That's when community transformation began. Residents cleaned their homes. Neighbors got to know each other and began caring for each other. And Danyel Rogers' view of the neighborhood altered.



Hardin-Simmons University alumna Dana Shaw swings with Aislin Taff during a Bible club at the HSU Friendship House. (BGCT photo by John Hall)

Two years ago, she considered the area “a rundown neighborhood,” she said. “But as I’ve gotten to know people, I see people who care and are trying to make a living.”

She is one of many Texas Baptists who have discovered continuous ministry is the key to changing lives. Through regular interaction, relationships can be built and behavior altered, community ministry leaders agree.

Churches across Texas are following a biblical mandate to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, said Tomi Grover, director of community missions for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

They are meeting the immediate needs of people looking for help, Grover noted.

But teaching a person to become self-sustaining requires understanding how a person thinks about and lives, Grover said. Starting from there, Texas Baptists can begin to change someone’s life.

Jimmy Dorrell, executive director of Mission Waco, acknowledged such an approach takes time. It doesn’t always result in people conquering addictions or finding a job. Sometimes, people relapse.

But Dorrell has realized continuous ministry is the most successful way to approach community transformation, and Mission Waco is passionate about that method.

"We are committed to an empowerment or developmental model of ministry," he said.

"There are a lot of challenges with that. It's going to take more time, more involvement. Yet it's the stuff of transformation."

Churchill Baptist Church in San Antonio is expanding what began as a children's ministry into what it hopes will become a church in a home it purchased.

The congregation tutors children, teaches English-as-a-second-language classes and distributes food throughout the neighborhood.

The expanded ministry helps meet people at their points of need, Pastor Neil Bennett said.

The new effort is designed to improve the church's ability to address the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of the neighborhood, he noted.

"It's an exciting thing," Bennett said. "It has gone from something that was essentially a children's outreach to something that's serving the entire community."

Joel Odom, pastor of Oak Hills Community Church in Floresville, agrees that continuous ministry is needed for change to take place, but the church does not have the facilities to sustain ministries like a clothes closet or food pantry.

So, Odom's congregation partners with a different organization each month to allow the church to reach out to the community and ensure that continuous ministry takes place.

"It lets the community know that we love them, we care for them," he said. "We're not here to take up a parcel of ground. We're here to care."

Many community mission efforts—including Hardin-Simmons' Friendship House—are supported by the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions. Texas Baptists support church-starting efforts through the BGCT Cooperative Program unified budget and the Mary Hill Davis Offering.

Dorrell applauds churches that partner to meet the needs of a community, saying ministry cooperation allows congregations to provide a wide variety of outreaches without duplication.

Grover believes Christian ministries are more effective when they are connected to churches, because that allows a family of faith to care for an individual in need.

A congregation can provide a support system for people whose lives need to be changed, she added.

Care and concern can lead to change, Danyel Rogers observed. When Christians are willing to be vulnerable and invest in other people, God's love can be seen clearly.

"Anybody who goes out and cares about others, they see change," she said. "Maybe I'm naïve, but I think that's the principle of love God gave us. Love changes people."