

# Rural poverty initiative takes Dallas church to five areas in five years

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Perry  
County, Ala.,  
families  
picked up  
backpacks  
for their  
children at a  
family  
festival  
sponsored by  
Royal Lane  
Baptist  
Church in  
Dallas.  
(Photos  
courtesy  
Jason  
WalkerCraig)

# Rural poverty initiative takes Dallas church to five areas in five years

By **Carla Wynn Davis**

*Cooperative Baptist Fellowship*

DALLAS—The more than 1,200 backpacks stuffed with school supplies that Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas gave away last summer wasn't the only impressive statistic about its mission trip to Perry County, Ala.

The Alabama trip capped a five-year tour of all five regions focused on by Together for Hope, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's rural poverty initiative.

"One summer our youth minister had us go to Arkansas," said church member Joey Belgard. "The next summer we went to the (Rio Grande) Valley."

Those summer mission trips led to ongoing involvement in addressing rural poverty issues through Together for Hope.



In the church's fifth consecutive summer mission trip to a rural county, members at Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas prepared 1,200 backpacks for the poor students in Alabama.

Together for Hope focuses on alleviating poverty and building community in 20 poor U.S. counties, which happen to be located in five regions of the country. And since 2003, members of Royal Lane have visited a county in each of the five regions. They took 30 members to Arkansas and Texas. Nearly 40 went to Kentucky, 42 to South Dakota and nearly 50 to Alabama.

"We learned about all the regions, and it was something we wanted to experience," said Garland Hamic, who has been on all five trips. "Mission trips give us a chance to take our youth places they typically never visit. We wanted them to know that poverty looks different in different places and wanted them to experience that."

But youth aren't the only participants. In recent years, the annual mission trip has become multigenerational and even more of a churchwide effort.

"All of the missions of Royal Lane are lay-driven," said Jason WalkerCraig, the church's associate minister. "There's almost full congregational participation in the preparation. It is impressive to participate in and watch."

For a church that averages less than 200 in Sunday worship, taking 50 people on a mission trip to deliver 1,200 backpacks stuffed with supplies is even more than church members thought they could do, WalkerCraig said. Mission trip participants handed out the backpacks to children during a family festival on the Marion, Ala., town square.

"We didn't know if we'd be able to (distribute) everything," Hamic said. "But you could barely see a blade of grass on that courthouse lawn there were so many people."

Like most summers, church members purchased as many supplies in the county as possible, trying to boost the local economy. While in Alabama, church members did what local residents told them the community needed, including construction projects, health screenings, nursing home visits and activities with children and teenagers.

"We always end up doing something different," Belgard said. "We don't go with our pre-packaged plan. We don't pretend like we can alleviate poverty. We just intend on showing people that somebody loves them."

Emphasis is placed on incarnational witness rather than overt, confrontational evangelism, Hamic explained. "When we can worship with (local people) and work alongside them, to me that is being the presence of Christ in a community."

And being the presence of Christ has often extended beyond the week the

team was in the county. While in Alabama, church members discovered one elementary school was in need of some extra resources. Upon returning to Dallas, the church gathered what the school needed and sent resources to Perry County with a church member already traveling to the East Coast.

“Even when we leave a place, we stay connected,” Belgard said.

Church members say they’ve learned a lot about poverty in their five Together for Hope mission trips—namely that poverty looks similar despite regional differences.

“One of the things I’ve heard from members who have gone on all the trips is that poverty—no matter where they go—always looks the same, just a different face,” said WalkerCraig.

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