

# Baptist church finds downtown niche in shower ministry

January 22, 2015

Downtown churches struggling to find their niche in ministry may want to try what First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn., has done—look and listen.



Besides dinner and Bible study (above), First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn., offers the homeless showers, laundry facilities and even occasional massages. Paying attention to young voices within its membership and to underserved needs downtown, the congregation launched a shower ministry in October 2013 that has surprised and inspired the members of the congregation.

Since then, the ministry has become the launching point for a number of other services the downtown church never dreamed of, [Pastor Thomas Quisenberry](#) said.

“It just continues to blossom as we’re shown new ways to help, and thankfully, the congregation is responding,” he said.

**‘We weren’t even sure’**

It all started four or five years ago in Colorado and Arizona, where First Baptist college students on a mission trip saw shower ministries in action.

Back home, they met with life deacon Herb Hooper and suggested the idea as ideal for the [Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) congregation and the homeless people around it. The church is located just blocks from a homeless shelter and other services for that population in Chattanooga.



Thomas Quisenberry “They pitched it, and I said, ‘OK, but what kind of interest is there?’” Hooper said.

They soon found out.

A fund-raising campaign paid for the installation of showers just off the church gymnasium. The goal was \$104,000, but \$107,000 was raised in 12 months for eight showers. However, enough money was raised by July 2013 to start the work then, Hooper said.

Hitting those fund-raising marks so soon was a surprise, he said.

“We weren’t even sure that we could raise it in two years, much less in one,” Hooper said.

### **Expanding ministries**

The surprises just kept on coming, and right from the beginning.

Three college students committed to volunteer at the shower each Thursday, when it's open from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

"Then the church just sort of caught on to it," he said.

"The college students are no longer with us, ... but members of the church and the college and youth ministries assist with that," Hooper said.

More than a year later, some workers in the shower ministry are homeless people who have availed themselves of the service.



First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn., found a unique way to minister to the homeless in its city. The ministry expanded when a local politician donated two washing machines and two dryers to the ministry, which were added to the units the church already had. This enables someone to shower and have laundry done at First Baptist.

Six months ago, the church started offering haircuts by volunteers from a local cosmetology school.

"And we have one guy who comes in to provide massages," Hooper said. "Last Thursday, we had 18 haircuts, 12 showers, 13 who did laundry and three to four who got massages."

**'It's given me a respect'**

The church has found its shower and laundry ministry dovetails with another program held at the church on Thursday nights.

It's an ecumenical ministry called [Mustard Tree](#), which uses the First Baptist gym to serve dinner and hold a Bible study for homeless people Thursday evenings. Different churches serve as the host each night, with First Baptist taking responsibility once a month.

"And it's all in our gym," Hooper said.

Hooper, a member of the church 52 years, said his involvement with the shower ministry has inspired him in numerous ways.

The college students who originally pitched the shower idea taught him to think big about projects.

"They wanted to do more than go to Bible studies," Hooper said. "They wanted to be the hands and feet of Jesus wherever they could."



The homeless are fed in the gym at First Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn. They set an example of how a church can look around it to find opportunities to serve.

“Since we are an inner-city church, it lent itself to helping people who just don’t have much,” he said.

Hooper took that approach with a truck ministry he and others from the church began within the past year. Participants use their trucks to move furniture for those who cannot afford to do so themselves.

“It’s allowed me to identify with a population that I knew very little about,” Hooper said of the shower ministry. “It’s given me a respect in many cases for people in that circumstance.”

It’s a good feeling to see someone be able to shower for a job interview.

“Spiritually, it’s something I felt led to do,” he said. “It wasn’t something I sought out in anyway.”

### **‘The best way is listening’**

Nor was it something the church sought out, Quisenberry said.

The congregation already had an openness to reaching out to those in need, especially through its annual Christmas brunch.

The event features more than 150 volunteers serving holiday meals to more than 300. Guests have an opportunity to get their photo with Santa, and each receives a goody bag.

“The showers are just the latest step working with the folks downtown,” he said.

It was from its working relationships with other churches and nonprofits downtown that First Baptist came to learn of the need for a shower ministry.

Knowing many other downtown churches are struggling to find their

niches, Quisenberry said he doesn't recommend shower ministries as the answer.

It's the paying attention to their surroundings that matters, he said.

"I don't know what we're doing has to be mimicked," he said. "But I do think congregations can find ways to be a positive influence on their community, and maybe the best way is having contact and listening."