

T-shirt dresses become worldwide ministry

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)—About a year ago, when Linda Johnson’s friend Linda Jacobson asked if she was ready to see God do big things, Johnson said yes.

“But I’ve thought a thousand times since then that I never could’ve imagined what was coming,” Johnson said.

Since Johnson, Jacobson and fellow volunteers launched the We Sew Love ministry at Huffman Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., they have sent hundreds of clothing items made from old T-shirts to children in Uganda, Zambia, Haiti and other places around the world.

They’ve made crib pads for children’s homes and burial gowns for children who die in hospice facilities.

And with about 40 volunteers and nearly an entire wing of the church dedicated to the ministry, they’re just getting bigger.

“God has provided, and it’s growing by leaps and bounds,” Johnson said.

Simple beginnings

As it often goes with good ideas, the ministry started small. Jacobson said she kind of stumbled into it when she was on a trip to California to visit one of her daughters a couple of years ago.

“My daughter had some school T-shirts that she wanted me to convert into dresses for her girls,” Jacobson said. “She also wanted me to try making

the girls some comfy underwear.”

With a little creativity, Jacobson took those T-shirts and turned them into fabulous, bright-colored little dresses—the kind little girls love to wear. She used some of her stretch-knit pajamas and made the underwear, which quickly became favorites. She figured it was a one-time thing.

But then back in Birmingham, a granddaughter who lives locally was at her house one day playing in the yard, and Jacobson sprayed her with the hose.

“She loved it, but I didn’t think that through,” she said with a laugh. “She was drenched and had no extra clothes along.”



Little girls in several places around the world, like this girl in Haiti, love the bright colors and unique designs of dresses made by We Sew Love.

Jacobson got her in some dry clothes, but she had to make her a pair of underwear from one of her shirts.

“Her mom called me a few days later and said: ‘Can you make her some more? She refuses to take them off because they are so much more comfy than her other undies.’ So I made her 17 more,” Jacobson said.

And with those 17 pairs of underwear, it seemed her calling was sealed. Soon after that, she met a missionary from Birmingham who serves in Haiti at a hospice center for children.

“I asked her if she could use some dresses or underwear there like the kind I was making,” Jacobson said. “I just wanted to give her the idea. I never thought I’d be the one to make them.”

The missionary’s answer was a resounding yes. They needed as many as they could get.

So on a weekend not too long after, Jacobson traveled with her husband to a college football tournament with things on her mind other than football. While he was at the games, she stayed back at the hotel and cut enough pieces to make 500 pairs of underwear for the children at Real Hope for Haiti.

Sewing ministry launched at church

Grace Klein Community, a nonprofit ministry in Vestavia Hills, began bringing Jacobson bags filled with cast-off knit clothing and T-shirts on a regular basis.

“I was overburdened with all the T-shirts at my house,” Jacobson said. “Then my daughter Stacey mentioned that this kind of sewing could be an opportunity for the women at Huffman Baptist Church during their summer break. She invited me to bring all my supplies and let the women help.”

Jacobson didn’t hesitate. She filled up a classroom at the church with her supplies, and the women went to work. In eight weeks, they cut countless

shirts into parts for dresses, underwear and shorts.

“The excitement among the women was infectious,” she said.

The men noticed the growing excitement and told Jacobson if she would bring her ministry up there to stay, they would make room for it.

Johnson noted what happened next breathed new life into a mostly unused preschool wing that had been empty as the church has transitioned in recent years.

“We’re without a pastor, and most of us are older,” Johnson said. “This ministry has been a wonderful thing for our church to be a part of.”

Nothing goes to waste

And it has given new momentum to the church’s women’s ministry. Like clockwork every Wednesday and Thursday—and other days of the week here and there, too—women gather for Bible study, then head over to the sewing suite to work on T-shirt clothes.



Linda Jacobson (left) started out making clothes for her granddaughters out of old T-shirts. What she thought was a one-time

thing has turned into a world-wide ministry using more than 40 volunteers. (BP Photo / Grace Thornton)

What they do has spread by word of mouth, and people bring them bags and bags of T-shirts. Volunteers—both men and women—wash and dry the shirts in a dedicated laundry room or in their homes, then move them into the harvesting room.

In that room, they cut the T-shirts into different pieces like neckbands, pockets, bodices, hem bands and hemmed sleeves—pieces that save them time when they're putting the dresses together.

They've found ways to make nearly every inch of a T-shirt usable. Nothing goes to waste.

Then they put all those pieces in the inventory room in color-coordinated bins. Volunteers can go shopping in the bins to find the pieces they want to use to make the clothes. They put them together in the sewing room, a room with two tables full of sewing machines, and get to work on the clothing.

The result is hundreds of unique dresses, boxers, panties, shorts and other articles of clothing that easily can be laundered and re-worn.

"It's a running joke—we're a sewing ministry where there aren't many people who can sew," Johnson said with a laugh. "There's so much to do other than just sewing. I'm learning how to sew now, but I started out washing T-shirts and praying over them. It's so amazing to see them change from when you first get the T-shirts to the finished product. It just fills you up."

The volunteers pour their love into those dresses, and they share that joy

with others, too.

As Jacobson has crossed paths with people—God-ordained meetings, she insists—she has told others about what they are doing and then taught them how to do it too. Because of that, groups are now doing the same thing in Tallahassee, Idaho and Iowa.

Johnson said We Sew Love has become bigger than they ever imagined. She says it's given her and so many others new purpose in ministry.

“This has gone beyond what one Baptist church can do,” she said. “And as much as people want to learn to do this, we would love to teach them.”

For more information about the ministry, visit the [We Sew Love](#) page on Facebook.