

# Abilene church leads drive to sweeten ministry to troops in Iraq

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ABILENE—Pioneer Drive Baptist Church in Abilene is spearheading what has become a communitywide drive to help sweeten a chaplain's ministry to troops in Iraq.

Capt. Matthew Van Hook, a battalion chaplain, is seeking to give troops a welcoming place to find respite—a coffeehouse at Camp Taji called the Mud House.

Captain Matthew Van Hook, a battalion chaplain, is seeking to give troops in Iraq a welcoming place to find respite from their battles—a coffeehouse at Camp Taji called the Mud House.

"This has been a good ministry because it allows me and the other chaplains to reach a lot of soldiers that normally do not attend our services," Van Hook wrote in an e-mail. "I've done a lot of relationship building with Wiccans, heathens, atheists and nominal Christians at the Mud House."

To help Van Hook with his ministry, Pioneer Drive Baptist began a campaign that has grown far beyond what the church could do alone. Businesses, churches and individuals throughout Abilene are collecting 25,000 pounds of candy bars and M&M candies.

The chaplains not only will give candy to the soldiers for their own enjoyment, but also will provide them quick means of introducing themselves to the Iraqis in the villages they enter.

### **Giving candy to Iraqi children**

“When they go into these villages, they can give out this candy to the children and their families to show they are friendly and want to have a good relationship,” said Randy Perkins, minister of missions at Pioneer Drive.

In the first week of the drive, the campaign received more than 3,000 pounds of donated candy.

“I can’t tell you how much the community is behind this,” Perkins said. “It’s pretty neat the way it has taken off.”



Van Hook’s family lives in Abilene. Prior to volunteering for service in Iraq, he had been pastor of Noodle Baptist Church near Abilene, and he served Pioneer Drive as minister of missions from 1996 to 2005.

In addition to the candy, T-shirts with the Mud House logo are being sold throughout Abilene for \$10. The shirts then are printed, shipped to Iraq and given to soldiers. Each person who purchases a shirt also writes a note that will accompany it.

“It’s amazing to read some of these cards. Sunday, a kindergarten class

purchased a T-shirt and wrote, 'From the kindergarten class to our heroes.' Most of them couldn't write their names, but they did the best they could. It was so good," Perkins said.

Organizers set a goal of selling 1,000 shirts. They sold 500 in just the first week, Perkins noted.

### **T-shirt sales could be pivotal to ministry's success**

The shirts could prove pivotal to the Mud House's success as a ministry, Van Hook said. "We think the way to preserve this ministry through multiple deployments by different units is to make it famous. The T-shirts play a pivotal role in doing that," Van Hook wrote. "When soldiers redeploy and wear their Mud House T-shirts at their particular garrison, the word spreads to units who may be deploying to Taji."



Chaplain Van Hook hopes word about the coffeehouse will spread to other units that deploy to Iraq.

For Perkins, the notes that go along with the shirts are just as important. He feels it is so important, he hopes the idea will catch on in churches and communities across the state.

"We'd love for every church in the state to pick a troop or a brigade or whatever they can handle to tell these kids how much they are loved and

appreciated,” Perkins said. “If they’ll call us, I’d love to tell them how easy this is to do.”

Perkins can be reached at (325) 437-1337.