

Church Under the Bridge celebrates changed lives

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WACO—For many, the underpass where Interstate 35 crosses South 5th Street in Waco marks just another section of Texas asphalt. But to others, it represents a place of hope, healing and changed lives.

A diverse group of worshippers gather under the Interstate 35 overpass in Waco for Church Under the Bridge.
(PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

[Church Under the Bridge](#) has met each week in the same location nearly two decades. The church recently marked its 19th anniversary with a "Walk for the Homeless," a 1.4-mile educational prayerwalk intended to raise awareness about the struggles of the poor and homeless while engaging participants in volunteer opportunities.

The walk began at the Mission Waco Meyer Center for Urban Ministries, where home-less people received new shoes, and ended with Church Under the Bridge's anniversary worship service.

Relationships are central to the church, said Jimmy Dorrell, senior pastor and executive director of Mission Waco. He described people crossing racial, economic and denominational barriers "to learn to care for each other."

The common misconception is that Church Under the Bridge is "for the poor," Dorrell noted. It is so much more than that, he emphasized.



Julie Breeding shares her testimony of salvation and overcoming addiction during Church Under the Bridge's anniversary service. (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

"I need the poor as much as they need me. It's this sense of collaboration that says we need each other," he said.

And that equates to an interconnected body of believers who come together for one purpose—just to "do church," Dorrell said.

"When I look out on Sunday mornings, I see this incredible mix of diversity—black, white and brown folks, Baylor kids sitting next to homeless people. It is a heaven thing for me. This is what the kingdom of God is about."

Dorrell remembered the day it all began.

"We were at (a fast-food Mexican restaurant) ... and realized that the homeless guys were literally sleeping under the bridge where we are now because they didn't have a shelter at that point," he said. "So we said, 'Let's go meet them.'"

Dorrell bought the men breakfast and "took the role of the student," he said.

"We don't know much about homelessness," he told them. "Teach us."



Fred Cantu (right) tries on a new pair of shoes during a special segment of Mission Waco's Walk for the Homeless known as "Shoes for the Homeless." (PHOTOS/Grace Gaddy)

That conversation ended with an invitation to do the same thing a week later, and more men returned. As relationships blossomed, someone suggested they hold a Bible study where they lived—under the bridge.

"We went over, and five folks showed up," Dorrell recalled.

As five turned into seven and then a dozen, Baylor students across the street joined to help, and the church has been going ever since, he said.

Looking back, the years have been filled with memorable events such as weddings, burials, church talent shows and mission trips. The church runs about 300 in attendance on an average Sunday—about 40 percent poor and 60 percent middle class, Dorrell said.

Small groups and Bible studies assemble throughout the week, including a recovery group for people struggling with addictions that meets an hour before the service. Most of these individuals would not feel comfortable in a traditional church setting, but Church Under the Bridge has no walls to keep them in or out, Dorrell said. Volunteers serve a hot meal around 10:30 a.m., and worship starts around 10:45 a.m.

"We'll feed you, and if you don't want to stay, that's fine. Take off," Dorrell said.

But he watches as participants come closer each time, as was the case with Julie Breeding.

"When I first started coming out, I'd sit on the outside," she told listeners during the anniversary service. Because of her addiction to crack cocaine, she was hesitant to talk to anyone. But in time, she moved closer and made friends.

"Nobody said anything about me being an addict," she said. "I'd hear the testimony of what this church had done and how you weren't ever judged

here. You weren't judged for your color or your addiction or your job. You were just you, and God was here with you. And God was going to help you if you let him," she said.

Breeding became a follower of Christ and has not looked back.

"That was three years ago on July 5, and I've been clean ever since," she said. "And I am a firm believer if it was not for this church underneath this bridge, this pastor and the people who come here, I would either be dead or in jail, because those are the only options."