

# CommonCall: First Blessing—More than a pair of shoes

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Glenn Lackey wants children to have shoes on their feet. But more than that, he passionately wants them to have the love of Jesus in their hearts.

He recalled Ronny Marriott, then pastor of First Baptist Church in Temple, challenging members of the congregation to find a way for their lives to intersect intentionally with people who have no connection to church and who may never have heard the gospel.

Lackey and his wife Deborah took the sermon to heart.

“We prayed God would enlarge our sphere of influence with a goal of leading people to the Lord every day,” he said.



Shoes arranged in line by sizes await children at a First Blessing event at Miller Heights Baptist Church in Belton. (Photo by Nan Dickson)

Glen Lackey spent 25 years in the shoe business, retiring as an executive with experience in multi-store retail sales management. Deborah Lackey worked in marketing and as a television advertising executive.

They made their combined gifts, talents and life experiences available to God, and First Blessing was born.

Lackey knew many children in the Temple area lacked properly fitting shoes, and he recognized what a gift it would be to families in need if their children had new shoes and socks.

He also recognized First Baptist Church could use events in which the church made shoes available as occasions for volunteers from the congregation to engage in meaningful conversations with families they might not encounter otherwise.

## **‘An environment where the love of Christ can be shared’**

“We want to build an environment where the love of Christ can be shared,” Lackey explained. “We enable people to have the conversations they always wanted to have. ... I’ve seen grown men who cried, saying it’s the first time they’ve ever presented the gospel to anyone.”



Volunteers (left to right) Beth

Kahler, Jameer McDade, Elizabeth Alvarez and Debbie Van Gonten check in registrants and distribute name tags at a First Blessing event at Miller Heights Baptist Church in Belton. (Photo by Nan Dickson)

The Lackeys developed an event in which families identified by local schools on the basis of need are greeted by a volunteer from the church. The volunteer and family begin by sharing a meal together.

“You can’t measure the value of what happens at that table,” Lackey said. “There are opportunities for relational evangelistic conversations.”

Next, the volunteer escorts the parents through the process of their child being fitted for shoes and given the opportunity to select a pair of their choosing. The event is structured so each family comes into contact with at least seven church volunteers.

“Research says people are more likely to become involved in church when they have met seven people they feel comfortable with. That’s what we built into the First Blessing events,” Lackey said.

First Baptist in Temple reached 300 children and their parents at the inaugural event in 2014. The next year’s event involved twice that number.

**‘Build relationships with those who are far from God’**



Tessa Respondek helps measure the foot size of a young participant at a First Blessing event at Miller Heights Baptist Church in Belton. (Photo by Nan Dickson)

“Our mission is to collide with those who are far from God,” Lackey said. “We want to touch the uninvited and the unchurched. I’m not really interested in just handing out things.

“Jesus came to heal the sick, and that means getting where the sick are. We want to build relationships with those who are far from God.”

Lackey views follow-up with each family as an essential component of First Blessing. So, he realized if the ministry continued to grow, it would soon become impossible for the members of First Baptist in Temple to do it alone.

So, First Blessing “scaled back” by expanding—allowing other churches to participate. Instead of one event sponsored by a single church with 600

people involved, a half-dozen churches each could sponsor an event for 100 people.

In 2019—before the outbreak of COVID-19—First Blessing worked with 24 churches throughout Texas—as well as two children’s homes in Haiti—to reach about 4,000 children and their families.

Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville was among the first churches beyond First Baptist in Temple to host a First Blessing event. Lackey presented the idea to Pastor John Wheat and Children’s Minister Kellee Parish, who agreed to take on the project.

First Blessing has become a regular Christmas season activity at Trinity Baptist.

“It has made us an even more giving church,” Wheat said, noting the sense of fulfillment volunteers find in being part of First Blessing. “There’s nothing like seeing little children get their first pair of new shoes.”

Enlisting volunteers and support has been a simple task, Parish said.

“Trinity is a mission-minded church, and our people want to minister in our community. Volunteers are already asking me when we’ll start getting ready” for the next First Blessing event, she said. “We’ve never had to worry about volunteers or money. ... We do it to share the gospel and be the light of Christ.”

## **‘We’re here for you if you need anything’**

Coggin Avenue Baptist Church in Brownwood also was among the early adopters of First Blessing. Like Trinity Baptist in Kerrville, Coggin Avenue has incorporated First Blessing into its schedule of Christmas activities.

Along the way, the church has made a few adaptations, noted Chris Stuard, director of Love Brownwood at Coggin Avenue Baptist Church.

“We gave parents the opportunity to wrap shoes, so it’s a present to their children,” Stuard said. Also, the church began charging parents a nominal \$3 fee for each pair of shoes, so they feel like they are buying the shoes rather than receiving charity.

The “shepherds”—church volunteers who share a meal with each family and escort them through the First Blessing process—also follow up with families by delivering a family photo taken at the event, along with information about planned Easter activities at Coggin Avenue.

“We want to show people in our community: ‘We love you. We’re here for you if you need anything,’” Stuard said.

## **‘Making people feel worthy of a relationship’**

When Marriott moved from First Baptist Church in Temple to First Baptist Church in Burleson, he soon incorporated First Blessing into his new church’s schedule of ministries. First Blessing quickly gained a “huge buy-in” from volunteers, he noted.

“Seeing the kids face-to-face and interacting with the families offers an opportunity to apply the heart of the gospel,” Marriott said.

As students at First Baptist in Burleson became involved, they asked to add one additional servanthood step to the First Blessing event, which has become a meaningful part of the overall experience.

“It’s awesome to see teenagers washing little kids’ feet,” he said.

While some churches reported families who benefited from First Blessing have made commitments to Christ, kingdom growth—not necessarily the numerical growth of sponsoring churches—remains the goal of First Blessing.

“You may not see anybody walk the aisle at an event, but we’re planting seed,” Lackey said. “Some people are prayed over for the first time in their life. ... We’re making people feel worthy of a relationship.”

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