

Garland Acteens stay on mission during pandemic

April 17, 2020

GARLAND—Missions discipleship is personal for Mary Lou Sinclair and her Acteens group—even amid a pandemic.

Sinclair has been Acteens director at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland more than 20 years. During that time, five of her Acteens have been named National Acteens Panelists, and three others have been selected as Top Teens.

They also have traveled extensively over the years to participate in mission trips, state and national Woman’s Missionary Union annual meetings and Blume, a national missions gathering for girls.

A close-knit group that reflects the church’s multicultural community, the Acteens describe themselves as family and thrive on frequent fellowship among the teens and their adult mentors. Based on their close connections, the 6th through 12th grade girls refuse to let coronavirus-induced social distancing and sheltering in place derail their missions and ministry focus.

Virtual meetings include prayer times

“We can’t begin to understand what is happening right now,” Sinclair acknowledged. “But we, as Christians, can be sure that there will be some good that comes out of all of this.”



Acteens at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland meet via Zoom video conferencing amid coronavirus-induced social distancing and sheltering in place. “It’s been really neat that we have the ability to use technology for our Acteens meetings,” noted Marisol Sandoval, one of the group’s Acteens leaders. (Photo courtesy of Marisol Sandoval)

On a practical level, Sinclair asked Marisol Sandoval, one of Freeman Heights’ youth ministers, to set up virtual Acteens meetings online to keep the group connected.

Sandoval, a former Top Teen who grew up as a member of Sinclair’s Acteens, now serves alongside Sinclair as an Acteens leader. In order to help transition the group’s meetings to video conferencing, “I had to learn everything I could about Zoom,” she said.

“It’s worked out pretty awesome. The girls are adapting well,” Sandoval added. “They want to be with us. They want to see us. They want to hear from us. It’s been really neat that we have the ability to use technology for our Acteens meetings.”

Sinclair said their virtual meetings still include several typical features

such as “praying for people in our church, praying for national and state WMU, having our lesson and having Bible study.”

Along with using available tech options to stay in touch, the teens and their leaders continue to plan a variety of missions projects, including a virtual prayer walk of their neighborhood using GPS mapping. They also plan to sew protective masks for residents in area apartment buildings and send letters of encouragement to members of a local Chinese Christian church who may be feeling ostracized as some Chinese-Americans are harassed on social media and elsewhere.

Sinclair said the goal of the letters simply is to say to fellow Christians, “We’re praying for you, we’re so thankful that you’re here and safe and we want you to know that we care about you.”

Still involved in missions action

Long before the widespread impact of the coronavirus crisis, the Freeman Heights Acteens have been known as one of the most active youth mission groups in Texas Baptist life.



Freeman Heights Acteens typically spend several hours a week volunteering at the ROC

(Re'Creation Outreach Center), a community ministry center that provides a food pantry, clothes closet, after-school tutoring, Bible studies and other ministries and activities for children, youth and families in the area. "This group of girls has become servants, not just those who are served," affirmed Adam Wood, director of the ROC. (WMU photo by Pam Henderson)

The girls regularly volunteer at the ROC—the Re'Creation Outreach Center. The community ministry center provides such resources as a food pantry, clothes closet, after-school tutoring, Bible studies and a host of other ministries and activities for children, youth and adults.

Even while observing social distance restrictions, the Acteens have helped fill bags of groceries for families to pick up at the door of the ministry center.

"The ROC is really the home base for several faith communities in the Garland area. Ultimately, it's a hub of gospel ministry within the area," said Adam Wood, director of the ROC and lead pastor of The Neighborhood Church in Garland.

"One of the marks of effective community ministry is when the people you are serving become people who serve. One of the places we've seen that most is with this strong group of teenagers," Wood said. "This group of girls has become servants, not just those who are served. I think it's in large part because of their connection with Mary Lou and the Freeman Heights youth group."

As her Acteens navigate a new normal, Sinclair plays a huge role in encouraging their ongoing missions commitment.

“Mary Lou is one of those people who does whatever’s needed,” emphasized Larry Venable, her longtime pastor at Freeman Heights. “What she has done with Acteens is fabulous, just teaching them spiritually, getting them involved in mission activity and growing. ... She’s definitely captivated by her relationship with Christ and the gospel.”

Opportunities for spiritual growth



What previously was a typical Acteens gathering at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland has now shifted to video conferencing and social media. “The girls are adapting well” to the virtual Acteens meetings, said Acteens leader Marisol Sandoval. “They want to be with us. They want to see us. They want to hear from us.” (WMU photo by Trennis Henderson)

Nayely Vallejo, one of the National Acteens Panelists nurtured by Sinclair, also helps lead Acteens alongside her mentor. Affirming the opportunity to

“just live on mission with my fellow Acteens girls, showing people who Christ is and showing people our servants’ hearts,” Vallejo said, “Because of Mary Lou and because of how she’s raised us as GAs and Acteens, it’s just natural for us to serve everyone any chance we get.”

With this summer’s national WMU annual meeting cancelled and Blume postponed until 2021, Sandoval said their Acteens “are sad, but they’re fine.”

While coping with social distancing, loneliness and disappointment, “I think there’s been a lot of growth spiritually,” Sandoval reflected. “This has definitely taken us out of our comfort zone. We know from looking in the Bible that whenever we’re taken outside of our comfort zone, there’s growth and we learn to trust in God. We learn how important relationships are.

“It’s hard because we can’t really go and hug them,” she shared. “That’s one of the hardest things for this social distancing because you just want to hug them and just comfort them and you have to trust God that he’s there to comfort them and love on them.”

Before the current crisis erupted, Sinclair said she was involved in event planning with a group of state WMU leaders who “talked about being the hands of God and being able to use the tools that we have in our hands to do ministry.”

During a recent follow-up video conference call, “we talked about how the things in our hands are totally different than what they were before,” she said. “But God finds a way and we just have to be looking for how he can use us to do his ministry.”

Even amid the turmoil of a global pandemic, pursuing new and creative ministry opportunities is precisely what Freeman Heights’ Acteens continue to do—just as Mary Lou Sinclair faithfully has taught them.

View a related video [here](#).