

# New York church meets needs with Texas Baptists's help

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NEW YORK—On the corner of Avenue D and 7th, a woman pulls soda cans out of the trash and stuffs them into a grocery bag to sell for a few cents. She stands in the shadow of high-rise buildings and less than two miles from famous luxury shops on Fifth Ave. Some people call it a tale of two cities, and one church seeks to be the bridge between the two.



Kareem Goubran, the associate pastor and director of adult ministries at Graffiti Church in New York, greets a man in the neighborhood near his church.

(PHOTOS/Jessica Acklen)

Every time Bruce Greer opens the door welcoming visitors to [Graffiti Church](#) in the Lower East Side of New York, he remembers his life before coming to the church years ago.

“I was a really hardcore street person,” Greer said. “I came to New York from Florida to be a writer. I was ... eating out of garbage cans. People would come up to me, and I was really paranoid. I thought they would hurt me.”

But after many encounters with leaders of Graffiti, Greer gave the church a chance and has found a way to minister to people that he has no problem understanding. Now he greets people at the door who come to the church's free Wednesday evening meal.

"I do that because I would have always loved that in my life, for someone to say, 'Hey, there's a meal here—no strings attached,'" Greer said. "I never thought I could do the door with my issues with people, but I've been doing it for a couple of years. I felt like all the things the church has done for me, at least I could do that."



Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger funds help Graffiti Church feed the homeless in New York City.



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Greer, who has energy to spare and joke for everyone who enters the church, is one of countless lives that have been changed by Graffiti, the more common name of East 7th Baptist Church.

“Our neighborhood, like many neighborhoods of people in poverty, there’s graffiti everywhere, so the name just came from the community,” said Kareem Goubran, associate pastor and director of adult ministries at Graffiti Church.

The poverty of the neighborhood is readily apparent, but so is the church’s influence as Goubran walks to the nearby Tompkins Square Park. A homeless man sits on a bench at the entrance of park and calls to Goubran. They chat for a minute. As Goubran walks down the street, people who live in the neighborhood stop him, wanting to talk. They all know his name, and he remembers each of them.

Graffiti Church uses food and fellowship to build relationships with the people of the area. The church was surrounded by a forgotten neighborhood with abandoned buildings scattered down every street when it began in 1974, Goubran said. Now a trendy architecture firm is across the street in the church’s smaller former location.



Meeting the needs of families is a major focus of Graffiti Church.



Graffiti 2—launched by the original Graffiti Church to reach a poverty-stricken area in the Bronx—began by offering a sports camp and other programs for children. (PHOTOS/Jessica Acklen)

“Our vision right now is not to just bless this neighborhood, but to bless the whole city,” Goubran said.

The most tangible way that Goubran believes Graffiti church is blessing the community is through its feeding programs.

“Every Wednesday night, about 60 to 100 people come. They sit down, and we bring them a hot meal. And we say prayer in the beginning,” Goubran said. “Essentially, what we do is try to show people dignity and show them that God cares about them. By the food we make and the smiles and the interaction, we try to make clear that God cares about their situation.”

The church also sponsors Free Lunch in the Park on Saturdays, as volunteers distribute about 250 sack lunches to people in Tompkins Square Park.

“Some are homeless, some are elderly on fixed income, but all are hungry for food that’s physical, as well as spiritual,” Goubran said.

Funds made available through gifts to the [Texas Baptist Offering for World Hunger](#) enabled the church to furnish its kitchen where all of the free meals are prepared, as well as support a program to help people get job training.



Young people participate in a Bible study as part of GSALT— Graffiti Serving And Leading Teenagers—a youth job-training program sponsored by Graffiti 2 Church. (PHOTOS/Jessica Acklen)

“We are so grateful to the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Texas hunger funds, because we feed people here who are hungry, who

would literally go without food, if not for the ministry that is done here. But we would not be able to do it without the BGCT,” Goubran said.

“BGCT and Texas hunger funds have helped us fund an employment program, giving people their first-time jobs and training along with those jobs. So, we hire a lot of people from the neighborhoods. In the children’s department, there are probably three site coordinators and another six people that first got connected with us through the BGCT giving them training to get their first jobs.”

In 2005, Graffiti Church expanded to a poverty-stricken area of the Bronx with Graffiti 2 to reach a new area with similar needs.

“Graffiti 2 is a church plant that came from the Graffiti church that has been in Manhattan for the past 30 years,” said Andrew Mann, pastor and director of Graffiti 2 ministries. “We began up here in August 2005 with the simple idea that through ministry we would start a church. We actually began with a sports camp. ... Through that we met a lot of children and teenagers of families in the neighborhood. We began doing other work to meet the needs of families in the community.”

One way the church meets needs is through its job-training program for youth, GSALT—Graffiti Serving And Leading Teenagers.



"What we do is try to show people dignity and show them that God cares about them."-Kareem Goubran

“It’s run like a job-training program, where they sign in and sign out. They get feedback from us. They learn ...basic skills of being employed and staying employed,” Mann said.

“Through their work here, they have the potential of earning a monthly stipend. That stipend is connected to the points that they earn every day. It’s a merit-based program. They get points for their activity and their attitude and how well they participate. Those points correlate to the money that they receive every week that they work with us.

“In addition to just teaching them skills we have a lot of opportunities to share Christ with them.”

Leaders of the original Graffiti Church and Graffiti 2 hope to see more lives changed through their ministries.

“The really exciting thing has been that you never know how God can use a piece of bread,” Goubran said. “You hear the testimonies... of people who say, ‘That sandwich showed me that God is real, and it made a transformation in my life.’”