

Partnership builds network of social support for families

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WACO—Jan and Tom Purdy never dreamed a casual acquaintance with Kokoa and Bryan Mason would become a vibrant friendship—or develop into something even more life-changing through the Family Partnership Program.

Kokoa Mason (left) and her husband, Bryan (2nd from right), have developed a deep relationship with Jan Purdy (right) and her husband, Tom (2nd from left), through the Family Partnership Program.

The Purdys, long-time members of [Calvary Baptist Church in Waco](#), met the Masons one year ago at Camp Hope. The camp, a Christian Women's Job Corp initiative, offers parents opportunities to spend time together while their children attend the Calvary Bible Club summer program.

The Purdys and the Masons became friends and began to learn from and appreciate each other. Their friendship moved to the next level when they entered the Family Partnership Program, an initiative aimed at mobilizing churches to increase the social support of Waco families.

The program matches a partner family from Calvary Baptist Church with a participating neighborhood family—working alongside a graduate intern in the Baylor University School of Social Work—to strengthen the neighborhood family's social support network. The partner family enters into a mutual relationship, giving and seeking support when needed.

The Purdys became the partner family to the Masons. Along with the

investment by the Masons' extended family and a few others at Calvary Baptist, their support system has been strengthened.

With their four children, the Masons have faced their share of difficult times. In an uncertain economy, they have found it difficult to hold down a job, raise a family and become financially stable.

However, there is something about the Masons that keeps them going—something Tom Purdy describes as a “stick-to-it-ness.” For months, even though the odds were stacked against him, Bryan Mason relentlessly pursued work until he found something that fit.

“They don't just quit, and that's inspiring,” Purdy said.

But the inspiration goes both ways. The Purdys' relationship has given hope to the Masons.

“They have been married for 46 years. That's motivation for us and is now one of our goals,” Kokoa Mason said.


Tom Purdy (left), a longtime member of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, enjoys time with Bryan Mason and his children, (left to right) Buddy, Cory and Elijah, as well as Bryan Jr. (not pictured).

Jan Purdy tells stories about the ups and downs of marriage, hoping to make the Masons' dream a reality. In return, she has been impressed by Kokoa Mason's parenting skills.

“She is great with kids, and her children are so well mannered,” she said. “I would send any kids to Kokoa's house at any time. She's great with them.”

Everett Smith, a social work intern, helped the Purdys and Masons navigate their relationship by highlighting their differences in communication patterns and managing conflict. If the Purdys did not know how to address a concern brought up by the Masons, they tapped into Smith's social work knowledge and skills.

In many friendships that cross cultural, racial, or socioeconomic lines, power dynamics and simple differences can impede relational process. But that was not the case with the Purdys and the Masons, who seem to have a deeper grasp about the kingdom of God, Smith discovered. They humbled themselves as servants and learners of the other and became proud to call each other friends.

Steve Corbett, author of *When Helping Hurts*, distinguishes between two approaches used in helping people—relief and development. Many churches offer relief, whether that means painting a house on a mission trip, throwing a party at an orphanage overseas or paying an electricity bill for a struggling family. Relief may provide enough support for a family to get back on track, but it also may keep them from taking necessary next steps in their lives, he notes.

Developmental work is the process of ongoing change that moves both the helper and the helped into a right relationship with their neighbors, systems around them, family members, their community and with God. That is the goal of the Family Partnership Program, a model created by the [Baylor University School of Social Work](#) and implemented in collaboration with Calvary Baptist Church in Waco.

Tapping the skills of social work interns, the program uses the natural resources, gifts and expertise of congregation members to engage and work alongside families in the surrounding neighborhood. All participants mobilize the strengths of each other to increase families' capacity to thrive.

The Family Partnership Program “combines the best efforts of the School of Social Work, along with the best efforts of the Calvary community, to accomplish much more than either group could accomplish individually,” said Kevin Tippen, member of the Calvary Family Partnership Program advisory board.

In its first year, the program worked to engage six Waco families by utilizing church volunteers, two social work interns and a program coordinator.

The volunteers participated in a six-week book study of [*When Helping Hurts*](#) and a four-week training about understanding issues of poverty and the practical application of how to engage families from a strengths perspective.

Volunteers served in a long-term partner role by getting to know families or a shorter-term consultant role by offering their professional or personal expertise to families.

The program began with relationships and through conversations. Calvary members referred families with whom they were in relationship and from whom they received permission. A few members of the church created an asset map of the congregation’s skills, talents and expertise. The program moved forward because of a core group of volunteers who believed in the model and the transformative nature of helping one another.

“We believe in this model because it is a healthy way of meeting needs of people in our church neighborhood,” said Kay Dunlap, a member of Calvary Baptist and a Family Partnership Program volunteer.

“We are able to use the gifts and talents of our members in a way that is not burdensome to any one individual. We believe this developing model will be sustainable for many years.”

Audrey Waggoner served in a research internship jointly sponsored by the Baylor University School of Social Work and the Baptist Standard, made possible by a grant from the Christ is Our Salvation Foundation of Waco.