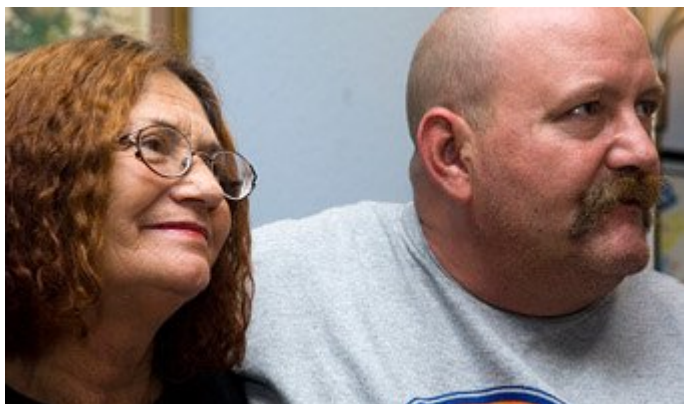


Samaritan House shows compassion to people with HIV/AIDS

December 11, 2009

FORT WORTH (BP)—It could have been just another evening meal at Samaritan House. Another church group dishes up the usual potluck fare in the cafeteria. They haul the food in and set up. Plop the servings on plates with pleasant but tense smiles. Then a quick clean-up and out the door again.



Julia (left) and Joe, two residents of Samaritan House, were among the first members of Southside City Church and Joe was the first person baptized into the church. (BP PHOTOS/Jonathan Blair)

But this group from [Alsbury Baptist Church in Burleson](#) was anything but typical to Joe and Julia, longtime residents at the home on Fort Worth's south side for people living with HIV/AIDS or other special needs.

“A lot of churches come to Samaritan House to feed supper,” said Joe, a clean-for-four-years drug addict who accepted Christ six years ago in an

Arlington jail cell.

“But almost everyone from this group came out from behind the serving counter to talk with us. For them to actually take the time to walk out amongst us and want to know about us personally, it was wonderful.”

Belinda Koenig was shocked at the residents’ reaction to their team’s simple gestures of handshakes, hugs and small talk.

“Many of the residents had tears in their eyes,” said Koenig, an Alsbury member whose husband Paul and children Andi, 13, and Hannah, 7, went with her to that first “Supper Club” at Samaritan House.

“They were surprised that we weren’t scared of them. They told us most people don’t want to shake their hands or give them a hug. I just fell apart.”

Many people living with HIV/AIDS feel like outcasts, even from their own families, Koenig said. Strangers can be judgmental—quick to assume people with AIDS acquired the disease due to sinful behavior. Others simply are uneducated about the disease, thinking they could contract it through innocent contact like a handshake or a hug.

“Few of the people living at Samaritan House get to see their children or grandchildren very often,” Koenig said.



Darrel Auvenshine (left) prays with Jerry, a resident of Samaritan House who was the first to join Southside City Church. (BP PHOTOS/Jonathan Blair)

“One resident’s daughter wouldn’t have anything to do with him, wouldn’t let him see his grandchildren. For them to see that we really cared about them, that we weren’t afraid for our kids to be there and give them hugs, they were deeply touched by that. One lady told me: ‘I can feel God when you hug me. It’s like God giving me a hug.’”

Koenig’s Sunday School class at Alsbury had been talking about ways to get their children involved in missions, and she mentioned the opportunity to serve dinner at Samaritan House.

A couple of members “jumped right in,” she said, and as others heard how rewarding the ministry experience was, more and more joined in. Soon the church had more volunteers than ministry slots.

Twelve Alsbury members participated in the first Supper Club early in 2008, and by autumn, the number had swelled to about 30 a week, with a total of nearly 60 members helping at one time or another, said Darrel Auvenshine, who was the church's minister of missions at the time.

The church pulled out all the stops for a Thanksgiving feast, then organized a "12 Days of Christmas" celebration that included church members buying presents for all of Samaritan House's 60 residents, including some of their children. A women's group made Christmas stockings for every resident.

Lonely hearts respond eagerly to the love of Christ, when His people simply take the time to care for others, Auvenshine said.

"One of the residents hadn't seen his mother in the 12 years since he was diagnosed," Auvenshine said. "He had come home to find all his belongings on the porch with a note that said, 'Gone to Wal-Mart. Won't be back today.'

"Many of Samaritan House's residents are in that kind of situation. That's why we wanted to be there at Thanksgiving and Christmas, to be family to people who have been rejected by their families."

As they geared up for that first Thanksgiving feast at Samaritan House, Alsbury also was preparing to start a church nearby. [Southside City Church](#) gathered for the first time in the facilities of College Avenue Baptist Church.

To support the startup, four single women and two single men moved into the area, which is home to five hospitals and draws both young urban homesteaders and people in desperate need of free medical services.

A year later, Southside City Church is an organized church and 20 Samaritan House residents regularly worship and serve alongside the congregation's other members.

Joe was at Southside's first meeting and was the first to be baptized into the church. He said churches like Alsbury and Southside play a critical role in keeping the doors open for facilities like Samaritan House in a time when operating funds are hard to come by.

"If it wasn't for churches, I don't know how Samaritan House would get by," Joe said. "Everyone who feeds there is from a church. The only people we can rely on are the people of God."

Julia agreed: "We're scared. What are we going to do? Rents are high and getting higher. Food is expensive. People are really struggling. Some are sick and will never get well, unless God Almighty does something. Then these wonderful people come and feed us and talk with us and care about us."

The 30 community groups that bring meals one evening a month provide a crucial service to Samaritan House—saving it more than \$100,000 a year, said Sarah Deats, the facility's communications director.

"It would be hard to overstate how much Southside City Church, and by extension Alsbury Baptist Church, mean to us," Deats said. "It is extremely moving to see Supper Club members and residents greet each other as real friends. Often these friendships are the only ones many of the residents have outside the house.

"Southside City Church is playing a big role in our efforts to rescue and nurture some of the neediest members of our society," Deats added. "We hope their involvement will inspire others to participate in the effort to combat HIV/AIDS and the devastation it causes in the lives of those affected."