

San Angelo church brightens Christmas for elementary school

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SAN ANGELO—More than 400 students at a San Angelo elementary school will have a merry Christmas this year, thanks to members of nearby Calvary Baptist Church.



Bertha Carrasco (left), principal at San Angelo's Bradford Elementary helps volunteers (left to right) Mary Edwards, Roselle Hall and Tammi Salinas from Calvary Baptist Church unload sacks filled with presents for students. (Photo courtesy of Calvary Baptist Church in San Angelo)

More than six years ago, when Calvary Baptist was filling shoeboxes with

small toys for Operation Christmas Child, a ministry of Samaritan's Purse, some members suggested the congregation pack a few extra shoeboxes for children locally.

"That first year, we took 15 or 20 boxes to Bradford Elementary School," Pastor Bobby Roger said. "The next year, it was about 100 boxes. But the teachers had to pick and choose which students received them. So, we decided, why not do it for every kid in the school?"

Annual ministry grows

Calvary Baptist launched Operation Bradford Child as an annual ministry to the predominantly Hispanic elementary school, where 80 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches based on family income.

The needs of the students at the school became clear to Roger early, when one of his church members suggested including a toothbrush and toothpaste in each child's gift package.

"I wasn't so sure about that until one little girl opened her box, got all excited, held it up and said, 'Look, I've got my own toothbrush,'" he recalled.



Students in a classroom at San Angelo's Bradford Elementary proudly show off the stocking caps and gloves included in the Christmas packages from Calvary Baptist Church. (Photo courtesy of Calvary Baptist Church in San Angelo)

The ministry has continued to grow beyond the small gifts capable of fitting inside a shoebox. Now, the school provides Calvary Baptist a list of the numbers of boys and girls by grade level for all 23 classes, and church members provide gender-specific and age-appropriate gift packages for each student.

In addition to toys, each child receives a stocking cap, gloves and a Bible provided by the local Gideons International chapter.

"We turn our fellowship hall into a toy warehouse," Roger said.

This year, members spent one Wednesday evening sorting donated presents and another Wednesday assembling packages and wrapping them.

“We had two 90-year-old members who were helping,” Roger said. “It’s something everybody can participate in.”

The church budgets \$2,000 per year for the ministry that costs about \$8,000.

“This year, we didn’t have to spend a dime from our budget,” Roger noted. In addition to donations from the congregation, other members of the community give to Operation Bradford Child.

Members of Calvary Baptist deliver the presents to each classroom, and Roger plays his guitar and leads the students in singing Christmas songs.

“We’ll sing ‘Jingle Bells’ and ‘Rudolph,’ and we’ll laugh and cut up with them,” he said.

‘Has to be consistent’



Pastor Bobby Roger leads

students at Bradford Elementary School in singing Christmas carols. (Photo courtesy of Calvary Baptist Church in San Angelo)

Calvary Baptist's involvement with Bradford Elementary School began more than 10 years ago when the church began occasionally providing meals for teacher appreciation lunches.

The partnership between the church and the school has continued to grow, with members volunteering to help with carnivals and other special events at the school.

"One thing I've learned is that it has to be consistent," Roger said. "You can't just be a one-trick-pony. We've built a relationship."

For the last three years, the congregation has provided a back-to-school banquet in August for all the employees at Bradford Elementary—administrators, teachers, cafeteria worker and custodians—and their families.

A Christian country musician entertains, and the church gives away door prizes. Guests in attendance have a chance to participate in a drawing for a flat-screen television, and the church also provides a variety of restaurant gift cards and teacher supplies.

"Everybody gets something," Roger said.

'A burden lifted'

Recently, Calvary Baptist presented a check to the school to pay off the past-due school lunch accounts for 47 students, allowing their families to begin the New Year with a clean slate.

“It was only about \$350,” Roger said. “It’s not that much for us, but it was a burden lifted from those families.”

While the partnership between the church and the neighborhood school demands consistent attention, the rewards outweigh the effort required—even if that doesn’t translate into people joining the congregation, he insisted.

“It’s not about building our church. It’s about building the kingdom,” he said. “We run about 100 on Sunday morning on a week when everybody shows up. If we can do something like this, any church can.”