

System helps ministries manage outpouring of holiday help

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DALLAS—Churches and community service providers know volunteer recruitment can prove challenging much of the time. Too often, needs outpace personnel. But then there's the holiday season, when ministries face a completely different challenge.



More than 1,000 volunteers served about 3,000 nonpaying customers at the Garage Giveaway, sponsored by 3e McKinney. The small organization was able to coordinate the logistics of enlisting and managing the volunteers using the Meet the Need computer system. (PHOTOS/Courtesy of Christ Fellowship in McKinney)

[Cornerstone Baptist Church](#) offers multiple ministries to the inner-city area near the Fair Park area of Dallas. For example, the church makes a shower facility available and gives free toiletries to the homeless every Thursday and Saturday, and it provides a clothes closet for neighbors in need on those same days. Cornerstone Baptist also serves seven meals a week to

homeless people—about 6,000 meals each month.

On the church's website, each of those ministries notes a need for volunteers. But in bold print and all capital letters, the website also posts another notice: "No more volunteers for Christmas Eve dinner. ... Our spots for volunteering during Christmas Eve are full."

The church learned its lesson the hard way with regard to limiting the number of volunteers during the season when they are easy to enlist.

"We would have been overwhelmed at Thanksgiving" if the church had posted an open invitation for volunteers to help serve meals to people in need, said Pastor Chris Simmons.



Children select toys at a Garage Giveaway sponsored by 3e McKinney. The event involved more than 1,000 volunteers, but 3e McKinney was able to coordinate it using the Meet the Need computer system.

"We had more than 1,000 volunteers a couple of years ago, and we couldn't

handle it. We only wanted 115 this year serving on site."

So, instead of a general invitation, Cornerstone Baptist worked through a couple of its ministry partners—Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas and Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall—to request a specific number of volunteers for the Thanksgiving event.

In recent months, both churches have implemented the Meet the Need computer-based management system to link volunteers to needs. The software runs through each church's website, and an account management and reporting system enables the church to track needs and responses.

"Having more volunteers than a ministry needs can be overwhelming for a ministry and create a bad experience for volunteers," noted Jim Morgan, founder and executive director of Meet the Need. The computer management system his nonprofit organization developed eliminates the potential for that happening.

"For instance, suppose Cornerstone had a need for 30 volunteers. All of the spots were filled except one, and two people saw that opening at the same time—one on the Lake Pointe site and the other on the Park Cities site. If one person logged on to volunteer even a millisecond ahead of the other, the posting would disappear, and nobody else could sign up. A ministry cannot oversubscribe volunteers through the system."



In addition to a free store, volunteers at the Garage Giveaway also provided no-cost services such as haircuts.

Managing the flow of volunteers can be just as important—if not more important—than enlisting them, agreed Jana Jackson, director of family and community ministries for Dallas Baptist Association. This summer, the association adopted Meet the Need as the behind-the-scenes operating system for its CityServe online community ministry platform.

So far, most of the largest churches in the association have implemented Meet the Need, Jackson said, and she expects smaller churches to adopt it as they discover its benefits. Annual cost is \$100 for a church that averages 500 or fewer in attendance, and larger churches are billed on a sliding scale.

"We feel like it's really starting to pick up as churches become more familiar with it," she said.

Instead of the time-consuming and labor-intensive chores of making phone calls, sending e-mails and personally assigning volunteers to specific tasks, the computer system frees church staff members and workers at service-providers to focus on ministry instead of logistical coordination, Morgan noted.



This girl found a teddy bear at the Garage Giveaway sponsored by 3e McKinney.

For a ministry with a small staff, that's an answer to prayer, Larry Robinson testified. Robinson serves as the executive director—and only fulltime

employee—of 3e (engage, equip, empower) McKinney, a consortium of churches, social-service providers, businesses and individual volunteers devoted to serving the poor in east McKinney.

A couple of weeks before Thanksgiving, the four-year-old organization coordinated a Garage Giveaway—essentially a no-cost garage sale—that involved about 1,000 volunteers from 14 churches who served 3,000 low-income people. Guests shopped for items ranging from electronics and toys to vacuum cleaners and furniture at Christ Fellowship in McKinney.

Another Garage Giveaway will be held in the spring at First Baptist Church in McKinney, Robinson noted.

In addition to that major event, 3e also coordinates an ongoing adopt-a-school program involving volunteers from 11 churches who serve as mentors and help teachers at nine at-risk schools.

A half dozen McKinney churches already have implemented the Meet the Need computer system, and 3e McKinney uses it to link volunteers and resources to needs, Robinson said.

"We run a lean operation," he said. "Meet the Need is what we needed to be more efficient in our work of collaboration and coordination."