

Fishersville congregation skips church to volunteer

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More than 320 volunteers skipped church Sunday to put Jesus' teachings into action throughout Augusta County.

Blue Ridge Church of Christ in Fishersville conducted its annual "Compassion in Action" mission event Sunday, which meant that instead of attending their weekly worship service, the congregation dispersed throughout the community to help those in need, said Stacey Burkholder, the church's outreach coordinator.

"This is an important Sunday for us," said Todd Brown, pastor of Blue Ridge Church of Christ. "The scripture tells to 'be doers of the Word, not hearers only.' This Sunday gave us a chance to do that, to show our children what it means to 'love your neighbor,' and to be of service to this community and county."

The 25 projects included picking up trash in parks, landscaping at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, cooking and serving a meal at The Valley Mission in Staunton, holding a children's fun day at Briarwood Apartments in Fishersville and repairing individual homes of those in need, Burkholder said.

"It has grown each year as our relationship has grown with the county and cities," he said.

Feeding the hungry

In Staunton, 11 volunteers from the church prepared and served brunch to about 60 people at The Valley Mission.

"You get a good feeling from serving people," said Wanda Marks, 40, of Stuarts Draft.

"Serving people was fun," agreed Marks' 7-year-old daughter, Gabby.

For some of the volunteers, serving pancakes, eggs, bacon and sausage was an eye-opener.

"I learned I take a lot of things for granted," said Cheyenne Coffey, 16, of Lyndhurst.

The mission serves three meals a day Mondays through Fridays and two meals a day Saturdays and Sundays.

"We easily serve more than 100 meals a day," said Sue Burkholder, interim executive director of The Valley Mission.

Missionstaff prepare meals during the week. On weekends, volunteers fix and serve the meals. Because of the national and local economic downturns, demands on the organization have grown as the number of walk-ins has increased, Burkholder said.

“We are filling a critical need,” she said. “After rent and utilities, many people don’t have enough money for food.”

The Valley Mission also offers shelter to men, women and families.

“If these people were not here, they would be somewhere on the streets,” Burkholder said.

Taking time to have fun

Sunday wasn’t all about work, though. About 10 volunteers from the church hosted a children’s event at Briarwood Apartments that featured food, face-painting, a bounce house and goody bags with candy.

After 25 children were given hot dogs and potato chips, church member John Coleman entertained them with sleight-of-hand magic tricks. Then the kids played in the bounce house and with bubbles.

“I think it’s a great idea,” said Lakesha Jarvis, 32, who attended the event with her 4-year-old son, Dalton. “The kids seem to be having fun.”

“It’s great for the kids,” agreed Amy Campbell, 27, who was with her 2-year-old daughter, McKenzie. “It gets them outside in this beautiful weather.”

Church members also handed out cookies to the apartment residents with invitations to vacation Bible school this summer.

“We want to build a relationship with the community,” said Morgan Alexander, 31, of Stuarts Draft, who has been attending the church for more than a decade. “This highlights what our church hopes to accomplish every day.”

Listening and obeying

If Blue Ridge Church members were missionaries to a native tribe, Brown said, they wouldn’t huddle together once a week for a private worship service.

“We would be involved in the daily lives of those people trying to find a need and fill it,” he said. “We would, daily, go to them in service and ministry rather than wait for them to come to us.”

Setting aside one Sunday each year and canceling traditional services to help others is the first step in reassessing the church’s goals, Brown said.

“We have been trying to rethink, as a church, our real purpose in this community,” he said.

Not only does the Compassion In Action Sunday allow congregants to help others in the community, Brown said, it also is a blessing for the church because it brings together churchgoers often separated from each other by three services.

“Just to expend this exciting energy as a church has been spiritual therapy for us,” Brown said. “But we also touched lives.”