

Cold-Weather Ministry

# Firewood

for the Needy

A Kingsport church leads a “woodcutting work camp” to keep Native Americans in North Carolina warm.

By Annette Bender

CHEROKEE, N.C. – Dodie has two big sausage biscuits on his dashboard, but he doesn’t seem interested in eating them. He’s more interested in talking about his work as he drives up and down these winding mountain roads with a truckload of wood.

Dodie Crowe, 32, works for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He cuts and delivers firewood to help keep needy Native Americans warm through the winter.

Every fall, a group led by First Broad Street United Methodist Church comes to help Dodie. For the past 10 years, volunteers from the Kingsport District church have gathered at Cherokee United Methodist Church. Their mission is to cut and stack enough wood to sustain Dodie’s 135 customers for several weeks, but also to stock enough wood for Cherokee UMC to distribute to needy people in the community.

According to Danny Howe, First Broad Street missions director, the “Woodcutting Work Camp” was conceived when college students from First Broad Street went to Cherokee on a home-repair mission trip in May 1992.

“Somehow we learned from the pastor at Cherokee Church about the need to get wood out to people,” Howe said.

That fall, a crew from First Broad Street returned to Cherokee. They began working with the local tribal council to get lumber from clear-cut forest areas, cutting it up for firewood.

Over the years, First Broad Street became the organizer of a week-long mission trip involving other churches. “Word gets out, and we also made contacts on other mission trips,” Howe said.

On the work camp’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in November 2002, about 75 workers showed up throughout the week to cut and stack wood. Other than First Broad Street, participating Holston congregations included St. Mark, Colonial Heights and Mountain View United Methodist churches, all of Kingsport District. United Methodists have also come from churches in the Tennessee, South Carolina, Western North Carolina, and Red Bird Missionary Conferences. Several participants have come from outside the denomination, Howe said.

Dodie’s finally ready to tackle those sausage biscuits. He’s a big Cherokee man with a ponytail, going coatless when everyone else is bundled up.

Between bites, Dodie tells how much he appreciates the annual visit from First Broad Street’s crew. Just last night, he says, he went to eat with some of the volunteers at a steakhouse.



Dodie Crowe (left) delivers wood, cut by church volunteers, to one of 135 customers.



Photos by Annette Bender, *The Call*

“They’re good people,” he says. “I wish they would come over when they didn’t have to bust wood.”

With the firewood prepared by volunteers this week, Dodie estimates he’ll have enough to keep his mostly elderly customers warm for two months. They receive the wood free, whenever they need it. Many still use wood-burning stoves because gas is expensive, he explains.

“Now that we’re ahead, the trick is to stay ahead,” says Dodie. He will try

to keep the wood piled high after the church volunteers leave, but he’s the only one on the job and sometimes he works nights and weekends to keep up.

Using chainsaws and hydraulic wood splitters with sawdust flying, the church volunteers admit that woodcutting is grueling work. (“I’m tired, stiff and sore,” said Mountain View’s Kirk Lowe.) The fellowship is what keeps them coming back, they say.

Each work camp participant pays \$125 to go on the mission trip, lodging at Cherokee UMC, in a nearby bunkhouse, or in donated hotel rooms. It helps that the food is good and plentiful. This past year, St. Mark members Mary Watterson, Ruth Russell and Leola Campbell wowed the crowd with fried chicken, biscuits and gravy, banana pudding and other home cooking.

Volunteers also like their rocking-chair time around an expansive fireplace in Cherokee UMC’s fellowship hall. Howe makes sure firewood is always available for devotions or just relaxing together in the evening.

“There’s a lot of godly stuff that goes on there,” he says of the fireplace. “It’s kind of its own altar.”

Pointing out his own relatives’ houses along the way, Dodie drives up another steep hill before pulling up at a small house. This is the home of a man who “chiefs” in town, he explains. By that, Dodie means the man dresses up like a Native American chief and lets tourists take his photo for tips.

The man and his wife come out to the porch to watch Dodie unload the wood. They don’t say anything. The man just flicks his cigarette, signs Dodie’s clipboard and waves after the wood is dumped alongside the porch steps.

Sometimes the church volunteers deliver wood and get to know the recipients, rather than spending all their time at the wood splitter. The first time First Broad Street came to Cherokee, they cut 120 pickup-truck loads of wood. Within five years, they were producing 400 truckloads per trip.

At the time, the high volume of wood sent up a warning flag for Howe.

“Our goal is not so much task-oriented, but to try to get folks to sit at the table with people they wouldn’t ordinarily be sitting with,” he says. “I didn’t want to break their spirit, but we had to get past that euphoric stage where we’re patting ourselves on the back, seeing if we could do more and more every year. It’s not just the end product but the process that’s important.”

It took time, Howe says, but the volunteers now seem to understand. Sometimes they become so close, it’s hard to say good-bye. First Broad Street’s assistant missions director, Connie Taylor, wiped tears from her eyes when two woodcutting veterans from Milan, Tenn., left a day early.

“It’s like all mission trips,” notes First Broad Street’s Bob Edmisten. “The woodcutting is the vehicle you’re riding in, but it’s not where you’re going.”

“I just love the people,” says First Broad Street’s Keith Clanin, “and I love working for Jesus.” ■

## Angels with four-wheel drive

There are indeed angels among us. And at Fountain City United Methodist Church in Knoxville, they come in the form of “Snow Angels.”

The Snow Angels ministry began in 1996 – at a time when Knoxville had received a significant amount of snow. The purpose of the ministry is to serve older members of the church who may not feel comfortable traveling in snow to buy groceries, visit the doctor, pick up medication or get firewood, according to John Needy, Fountain City director of congregational care.

There are currently 11 volunteer “angels,” who all have four-wheel drive vehicles. People needing assistance call Needy and he dispatches the volunteers.

Although Knoxville has had mild winters in recent years, the Snow Angels remain on call. Since its inception, there has been a steady interest by volunteers who are anxious to help, he added.

“It is a comfort to the congregation,” Needy said about the snow-related ministry. ■

– Suzanne C. Hickerson

## SNOW JOB

When flakes fall, pastors keep the church doors open (and the sidewalk shoveled).

By Suzanne C. Hickerson

Neither cold temperatures nor snow have kept congregations across the region from gathering for Sunday morning worship.

In recent weeks, snow has blanketed many communities throughout East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Some churches have established a snow policy concerning worship services and church activities, while others evaluate the situation on a case-by-case basis.

“I am here early and I do bring a shovel,” said the Rev. Don Nation, of Mafair United Methodist Church in Kingsport District, about preparing for Sunday morning service.

Like many school children who pray for snow during the week, Nation said he prefers snow on Thursdays, so by Sunday cabin fever has set in and people are ready to come to church.

“People want to be in fellowship with others,” he said.

Several pastors said that although church attendance may be below average following a snowstorm, they are sometimes surprised at the number of people attending worship services.

“One time we were the only church in town to have services,” said the Rev. Charles Lockerby, of First Pearisburg UMC in Tazewell District. “We had a few visitors from other churches to attend our service.”

The Sunday worship service is rarely canceled, Lockerby added. The worship service is held for anybody who can safely travel to church.

The snow policy at First Pearisburg also has provisions for church activities scheduled during the week. Those activities may be canceled if the area schools are closed on the day in question.

First Galax UMC in Wytheville District does not have a set snow policy and makes decisions on a case-by-case basis, according to the Rev. Tom Ballard.

Since the parsonage is located directly behind the church, Ballard said he is reluctant to cancel Sunday worship services unless there are severe conditions in addition to snow, such as ice or power outages.

In recent memory, Sunday services have only been called off once in the last 10 years because of snow, he added. Safety is always the main factor in making decisions about canceling worship or activities.

As with any decision, there are consequences. Inclement weather can also have a negative effect on church finances.

“How do we recover if we don’t have service?” Ballard said.

“Some of our flock is not as disciplined in giving. Just because we didn’t worship, the ministry continues to take place.”

The Rev. Laura Rasor, of Piney Flats UMC in Johnson City District, added, “We do count on the weekly offering.”

Ballard said that he will often take the opportunity following a snowstorm to remind church members through the newsletter or during Sunday worship to give even when they miss church due to inclement weather.

Sometimes his reminder comes in a humorous manner.

“Today we are going to pass the offering plate around two times to make up for last Sunday,” he recently told his congregation.

Despite the struggles church leaders face in balancing the need for safety, ministry and finances, several said the situation often brings out the best in people.

Over the years, Ballard said he has observed many church families that stay in close contact and often take care of each other. They make it a priority to attend church, even when it snows.

“It is nice to know they have the inner drive to go,” he said. “[The snow] could be used as an excuse.”

Rasor said she often enjoys the snowy days because she has the opportunity to witness the spirit and dedication of church members who pitch in to help shovel the sidewalks or fill in as Sunday school teachers and ushers. ■