

'Go where you are needed most'

KNOXVILLE MISSION

IS BRIGHT SPOT IN CHURCH DEVELOPMENT



Photos by Annette Bender, *The Call*

The Rev. Bruce Spangler leads children's time during Sunday worship at Knox Area Rescue Ministries. The mission has 18 apartments for families, including 61 beds.

By Annette Bender
KNOXVILLE, Tenn.

The chapel is beautiful and new, an unexpected gift in a crumbling inner-city neighborhood. Some of the men look uncomfortable, sitting in pews with wetted-down hair and trembling hands. The children seem unfamiliar with worship rituals, rushing outdoors after the service has begun, noisily returning during prayer.

But then, the Rev. Bruce Spangler launches into a message laced with Appalachian -flavored jokes. The people begin to smile and settle down.

This is The Carpenter's House, Knox Area Rescue Ministries' on-campus community of faith.

It is nondenominational, led by a full-time United Methodist minister. Holston Conference and Knox Area Rescue Ministries each pay half of Spangler's salary and support.

In a year when five of Holston's 12 original new-church projects will be eliminated due to budget shortfalls, Knox Area Rescue Ministries is a "bright spot," according to the Rev. John Ripley, Holston director of new church development.

Since regular worship services began in the mission's chapel in October 2002, average attendance has increased steadily to 61. The worshipping community includes long-term residents battling substance abuse (75 percent), homeless people (15 percent), and people living in the community (10 percent), Spangler said.

When Knox Area Rescue Ministries' former president, Monroe Free, approached the conference in early 2002 about providing a full-time pastor to lead outreach ministries to

the poor, Holston leaders first asked, "How?"

"We had never done this before," Ripley said. "We wondered how a rescue mission to the poor could be called a new church start.

"Then someone remembered that Mr. Wesley told his preachers, 'Don't go where you are needed. Go where you are needed the most,'" Ripley said. "If not here, where we be needed more? If not the Methodists, who will go?"

Holston made an arrangement with Knox Area Rescue Ministries, and Spangler was appointed to serve there in July 2002 – two months after the mission's new facility and chapel were completed.

"They wanted a fully credentialed person with accountability to their denomination," says Ripley, explaining why the mission first approached Holston with the ministry opportunity.

"God brought the two together," says Stan Frazier, referring to the partnership between Holston and the mission. Frazier, the mission's chief operating officer, is currently acting as president until a new leader comes on board in May.

"People of like minds and like spirits and similar kinds of visions found themselves together talking," he says. "We really do believe that it was God's timing that such a partnership took off."

Last Chance

Andrea Martin, 40, has been living in Knox Area Rescue Mission's residential program for 45 days. When he first met Spangler at the mission, he didn't know he was a pastor.

"I just thought he was another caseworker or something, because he spends all his time walking around, talking to people, getting to know people.

"Any problem I have, I can go to him and talk about it," Martin says of Spangler. "He'll be open-minded about it, you know. I had a lot of drug prob-

lems before I came here.

"But basically, I don't have the desire to do drugs any more. I've turned my life over to the Lord."

Knox Area Rescue Ministries has always had church activities and pastoral care provided by volunteers and existing staff, according to Spangler and Frazier, but building a chapel and hiring a full-time minister took the ministry to a new level. Worship services are available every evening for overnight guests: 330 or more men, women, and children, depending on the weather.

Spangler preaches on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings and provides pastoral care for guests and staff, including counseling and faith development. Volunteers from other denominations lead chapel services on other nights.

"There's no question that there's a benefit to having a fulltime clergy here, because we're actually the bottom line," Spangler says. "We're sometimes the last chance for folks in terms of recovery or even emergency shelter. We're the only place in Knoxville where you are allowed to come spend the night without any charge or anything. Usually they've exhausted their insurance or exhausted the patience of their family members, whatever."

Spangler, who grew up in a military family, says his personal struggles with belonging and self-confidence prepared him for service in inner-city ministries. His "beginning point" to work with people at the mission is to "simply remind folks of God's prevenient grace."

"For many of them, the guilt and shame is just so prevalent and so oppressive that they believe they're not worthy of that kind of relationship," he said. "Yet God's prevenient grace is with us all the time." Spangler says that Matthew 5:5 from *The Message* is "kind of our mantra, which I constantly bring to folks in terms of that prevenient grace."

"He prays with me, he talks to me," Martin says later. "He's really helped me a lot."

Good Mix

After Sunday morning worship, the crowd files out to shake Spangler's hand. Several stop to say a few emotional words. They all seem to know the preacher and he seems to know them.

By summer 2004, Knox Area Rescue Ministries hopes to assume 100 percent of Spangler's salary and support, says Frazier, a member of Beaver Ridge United Methodist Church in Oak Ridge District.

"That's our goal," he says. "The conference, in starting new church initiatives, would expect churches to eventually be able to sustain themselves. So this is not different than any other church start."

Spangler, Frazier and Ripley are encouraged by the mix of people participating in Sunday morning services. Some members of the community call the church their own, giving offerings and participating in a weekly discipleship group along with mission residents.

"It's a truly mixed group of folks from economic as well as racial and diverse backgrounds," says Frazier.

But for Spangler, the issue of success is "really determined by the experience of [inclusiveness]. As long as we can foster that, I don't think we really have any expectations in terms of numbers.

"I am grateful to the Holston Conference to be involved in this type of intentional ministry with those who are marginalized." ■



Andrea Martin (far left), a resident at Knox Area Rescue Ministries, takes up the offering.

Budget cuts wipe out five new church projects

In January 2002, Holston had 12 ongoing new-church projects. By August 2003, five will have been eliminated. Budget cuts caused by churches failing to give 100 percent of their Fair Share apportionments forced the Witness Ministry Team to make "tough" decisions, according to the Rev. John Ripley, director of new church development.

Previously approved at \$687,000 for 2003, the Witness Team will receive 51 percent, or \$351,328, of their original budget. Consequently, the conference has stopped funding Cokesbury UMC's Soulworx, Bethlehem Center church, Jones Memorial's Korean church, and a Jonesborough, Tenn., church plant. Later this year, Holston will phase out funding for Cokesbury's Korean church.

Most of the remaining new church projects have also experienced cuts, Ripley said. For example, The Rock, parented by East Pine Grove Park in Johnson City, will see conference funding drop from \$50,000 to \$20,000 this year.

Some of these projects have found funding elsewhere, Ripley said. Parent church Emerald Avenue UMC will kick in \$15,000 to help support Virginia Avenue UMC. Bethlehem Center is absorbing the \$6,000 Holston originally budgeted for the Chattanooga church. But some, like the Jonesborough plant – designed to attract the area's 18- to 30-year-old "storytelling" community – are discontinued. "That was the most painful cut of all, from my point of view," Ripley said.

The cuts help reemphasize why paying Fair Share apportionments is important, Holston leaders say. Ripley also points out that gifts to the Builders Club enable members to give directly to new church development. For more information, contact Ripley at (865) 690-4080 or johnripley@holston.org.

—Annette Bender