



A mission field with 165,000 people

Bristol churches minister to race fans



Photos by Annette Bender, *The Call*

The Rev. Keith McGrew (above, left) visits with Craig Hayes, a dog kennel owner from Proctorville, Ohio. Hayes asked McGrew to give his disabled friend a ride to the race track. "He won't come and ask for it," he said.



Photo courtesy of Donna Lewis

Children from First Bristol UMC sing for a Saturday-morning worship service held for race fans.



Clayton Carpenter (above, left), a volunteer from First Bristol UMC, hands out flyers promoting the Saturday morning worship service.

By Annette Bender

BRISTOL, Tenn. — The woman is nauseous. It's probably 90 degrees at 11 a.m., and the only place she can go to rest is her unairconditioned tent with a sleeping bag. Yet, here she is, green at the gills and in need of relief.

The Rev. Keith McGrew is on the case. He's got a first-aid kit and he's ready to offer the woman a stomach-settling medication. Without making any judgment about how she became nauseous in the first place, McGrew offers the woman and her companion a golf-cart ride back to their camp site. She slumps in the back seat, but not before accepting a cold pack from McGrew, for placing on the back of her neck.

It's race week in August at Bristol Motor Speedway, and about 35 volunteers from four Abingdon District congregations are ministering to the 5,000 guests of Hicks Campground.

But this isn't just a United Methodist ministry, nor is Hicks Campground the only beneficiary of the care shown by volunteers like McGrew.

McGrew and crew are part of a large ecumenical group known as Raceway Ministries, which serves 10 campgrounds surrounding Bristol Motor Speedway as well as race communities at other tracks around the country.

In Bristol, about 400 volunteers from 35 different churches hand out cookies, Bibles, and tracts; conduct

campground worship services; escort handicapped people to the track; aid emergency workers; accompany the ill or injured to the hospital; and generally do whatever they can to serve the thousands of fans who come to town twice a year.

"My favorite way to describe it — it's a mission field of 165,000 people that comes to you," says McGrew, pastor of Benham's Circuit, which includes Campground, Mary's Chapel and Booher's Chapel UMC. "It's an awesome responsibility."

Donna Lewis, program director at First Bristol UMC, says the mission field is rife with possibilities to share the gospel. The fans "have a lot of time on their hands," she explains, arriving as early as a week before the races.

"I've had many opportunities to witness," says Lewis. "They are curious, and they will approach you. When we give out tracts, I can count on one hand the people who've said, 'I'm not interested.'"

For this Aug. 25-28 race week, Lewis' church members baked cookies and bought special racing-edition New Testaments to distribute. At one family racing event, First Bristol volunteers handed out 1,000 bottles of water labeled with the church's name and "A cup of water in Jesus' name."

Benham's Circuit members joined First Bristol in taking four-hour shifts to serve at Hicks Campground — which happens to be owned by members of Bluff City UMC, Joe and Janie Hicks.

"We only go into campgrounds where we've been extended an invitation," says Brenda McClure, administrative assistant for Raceway Ministries and also for First Baptist Church of Bluff City. "We don't charge anything for our services. We're just there to show the love of Jesus."

Even so, campground activities can get "pretty raunchy" in the wee hours, McGrew admits, and he's often been called on to gently suggest that the instigators pipe down or desist.

"We get a lot of respect for Raceway Ministries," McGrew says. "They usually cooperate."

The next morning, McGrew drives around on a golf cart, checking on the previous night's party-ers as well as others who might need a helping hand. When an Illinois couple's RV malfunctioned, McGrew and crew helped them get it repaired. When a Wisconsin couple's truck and camping gear were stolen, Raceway Ministries volunteers gave them food and other supplies.

"We're not beating anybody over the head with a Bible," Lewis said. "Sometimes it's just a matter of being silent, being available and praying for a situation. We'll do anything we can to help. I think that's the best witness you can do anyway."

With race fans returning in April 2005, many opportunities for ministries still exist, especially for youth groups, says McClure. For more information, call (423) 538-7922. ■