

Some Lessons Learned — Christmas, Children, and our Community

It's never too early or too late to think about Advent and Christmas! Finding the "right" outreach ministry for children in your community during Advent can be challenging. I know it's a challenge for us each year. Here are some of the lessons learned at FUMC Fort Worth and First Street Methodist Mission.

For a time, we delivered gifts directly to children at a local elementary school. While this was a huge joy for members who delivered the gifts, we later realized that it produced some difficulties for families when their children went home. Often we were only able to provide a toy for one or two of the total children in a household. So if the parents couldn't afford to buy gifts for their other children, it was hard on the whole family when only some of the children received toys for Christmas. Even if the family could afford gifts for their other children, it was difficult financially for the parents to purchase toys of a similar price for their own children. While our church members derived great joy in seeing the eyes of these children light up when they received their gifts, the parents (especially the fathers) felt ashamed when they were not able to provide such wonderful gifts for all of their children.

Ultimately, we changed this approach in response to these challenges and gave the gifts directly to the parents without the children knowing. This allowed the parents to give the gifts themselves and better preserve their dignity. Additionally, we began to work with the parents for ideas so our gifts were comparable to the ones they could afford for their other children. If they were not able to afford any gifts for their other children, we would purchase gifts for all the children in the family. We included children up to age 18 — we are all kids at heart and love to receive gifts!

We also added a ministry component where the children were able to go into a room filled with small gifts for the parents and "shop" for a gift for theirs. The parents waited in an adjoining room with punch and cookies while volunteers escorted the children into the shopping area. Either individually or as a group, the children would pick out a gift. The volunteers would help them wrap it and put their names on it so they had a gift to put under the tree for their parents. This was a great way for the children to experience the gift of giving.

Many of the parents told us that what the family really needed was basic household items like sheets, towels, dinner plates and glasses, toilet paper, laundry soap, shampoo, and bath soap. So one year we created a giving tree of sorts with the family's name and items on their wish list. This was not very successful. My assumption is that's because shopping for sheets and towels is not as much fun as shopping for a toy. But isn't that true for all of us? Bringing home toilet paper and laundry soap doesn't usually elicit cheers and excitement from the family as much as bringing home a new toy does — whether it's a child's toy or a grown-up toy.

The most helpful and dignified approach is to give the family a gift card and let them shop and purchase the items on their wish list for Christmas. Unfortunately, this is often seen as having little or no "fun" factor for the giver. Also, some feel that it is unwise because the receiver may

use the card to purchase things we don't think are appropriate, necessary, and/or expected. In other words, we don't really trust the receiver to use the gift card as we intend for it to be used. This brings us to Ministry *With* instead of Ministry *To* — when we practice Ministry *With* we have a relationship *with* the family and the parents. Plus, we are much more aware of the family's needs, work ethic, and spending priorities. Ministry *With* can allow us to find joy in giving gift cards, just like we do with family and friends, because they are just that — friends and family.

Perhaps real transformation will occur when we develop ongoing ministries that help us know and serve our neighbors year-round. As we deepen those relationships, we are better able to partner with parents as they provide for their children in the ways that every parent loves to do. As we continue along that learning curve, we'll trust God to work with our love and generosity while we seek the best practices for loving our neighbors.