

Program helps families in need during Christmas

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Community Correspondent

The Rev. John Young and his wife, Pansy, have four adult children and three grandchildren, having been married for 27 years. Christmas will be special for them this year because they are concerned about the welfare of families in crisis during the holidays. They have operated the Christian Faith Center, a full-time ministry to the Maryland Avenue Apartments, since 1993. For Christmas, they sponsor a program called "Santa's Last Stop," in which they help families Dec. 23-25 when most agencies are closed.

As late as Christmas Day, Young has gone to deliver Christmas toys and food for a family. Last year his last stop was at 5 a.m. on Christmas Day. The bright, grateful eyes of the children motivate him to continue the mission.

He said, "The Lord placed this vision in our hearts to make a difference in the community."

Although he is a minister, his ministry does not take place within the walls of a church or a synagogue. He goes into the community, into the Maryland Avenue Apartments, to lift the spirits of the people. He and his wife founded "Santa's Last Stop" because, they said, they observed that during the holidays, the homeless and alcoholics living on the street have children too. When Christmas came, many of them would wake up to the realization that Christmas had come. Their children had no special meal or gifts to treasure, after hearing all the stories about Santa during the holiday season.

Young and his wife realize that some people wonder if the program will be taken advantage of. What if people come to the Christian Faith Center for help who really could support themselves. Pansy responded, "What do you tell a child who has no food and no presents after he heard at school that Santa is coming? Jesus is the reason for the season, and if we don't go out into the community to let people know what it is all about, they will not know."

John Young responded, "We cannot point a finger at the homeless until we have walked in their shoes. Until we have been on the other side of the fence, we do not understand." Many of them are in situations that they are trying to get out of.

The Youngs have identified 30 families who are in need for the holidays, and have found sponsors

for 13 of them. With 17 families left, they are still looking for individuals, businesses, churches, fraternities, sororities and other organizations willing to make the holidays special for someone in need. They assist all families, African-American, white, Hispanic, all who are in need.

Each family goes through a screening process. The Youngs check with Social Services and the Christmas Clearinghouse to be sure that the family is not being served by another agency. Because the Youngs have worked in the community throughout the year, people are open to sharing their needs with them. The Young family wants to encourage single mothers to complete their education, to develop educational programs for tutorial sessions in their portable classroom, and to offer workshops on parenting and home ownership.



The Rev. John Young and his wife, Pansy, are the operators of "Santa's Last Stop," sponsored by their full-time ministry, Christian Faith Center.

John Young volunteers at the North Hills Traditional Academy and often substitute teaches for them as well. He and his wife serve as intervention counselors for students around the community who, they say, may not love themselves enough to behave appropriately in class. John Young is willing to counsel with youth at various schools. Their ministry was ordained at St. Peter's World Outreach Center, one of their fellowship churches.

Conference on race relations to save city from further ills

CHARLOTTE (AP) — Charlotteans are holding a two-day conference on race relations in hopes that a city that some view as sick doesn't become terminally ill.

The city has less consensus than just five years ago, said some of the 600 who attended the conference Sunday. It continued Monday.

"We're seeing less tolerance, less acceptance," said John Walsh, 51, former senior pastor at Myers Park Baptist Church. "We may not be sick yet, but we've caught a cold."

Dee Fox, a housewife and volunteer on children's issues, pointed to the recent tensions on the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners.

"People are running for their own agenda," said Fox, who is white. "It's a totally different government than it was before."

Others in the audience had similar feelings. County commissioner Parks Helms received a standing ovation. Helms was ousted from his chairman's post last week after being accused of supporting a gay candidate for commissioner.

"This conference is a prelude, a good prelude, to focusing us to ask ourselves how can we live with each other in a changing, more diverse community," Helms said.

"The events of the last year, the events of last Wednesday, show me we are a long way from overcoming the prejudice and frustration."

A police shooting in November 1996 was one reason Charlotte leaders called for the conference. In that incident, an unarmed black man was shot by a white officer. Three investigations exonerated the officer. But many still saw a need for racial healing.

In January, Helms and Mayor Pat McCrory asked The Foundation for the Carolinas to organize the conference.

"This is kind of a defining moment for Charlotte," said neighborhood leader Rickey Reid. "There are a number of issues we have to face forthright."

The discussion part of the program came about 40 minutes into the conference, which was created to get people talking about race. Participants paired off and explained their hopes for the two-day event.

"I wanted to see for myself whether the misperceptions (I had about whites) were true," a black man who didn't want his name used told his partner, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Chief Dennis Nowicki.

"My biggest hope," said Ruth Stephenson, a white woman, "is

that we all end up so frustrated we keep doing something, we keep the momentum going after we leave here."

Grace Atkinson, a black woman, told the people at her table: "I want to get a better understanding of what causes the great divide between us."

The four-hour session had its bumps.

Many people feared that conference participants were like-minded and already wanted to improve race relations, rather than being people who need convincing. They also worried that nothing would come from the conference, and that not enough Hispanics, Asians and Indians participated.

The crowd appeared about 60 percent white. Most of the other participants were black, though several Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans also were there.

Conference organizers urged a wide variety of people to register. One of the supporting organizations, the Charlotte Chamber, sent a letter to businesses, encouraging each to send at least three people.

James Ferguson II, chairman of the Community Building Task Force, which planned the convention, was glad people worried about the post-conference effort.

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