

Society Of Strangers Program Serves Needs Of Street People

By Jalyne Strong
Post Staff Writer

"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them." (Isaiah 41:17).

"About 30 years ago, I visited New York City. One of the tours was through the Bowery. I saw men lying in doorways, sitting on curbs, and walking the streets. They were dirty beyond recognition. They numbered in the hundreds and the guide called them 'bums.' I thought to myself, this could never happen in North Carolina.

"But it has happened right here in Charlotte. Today we call them 'street people' and there are hundreds of them," tells Walter Curlee, director of the Volunteers and Ministries programs at First United Methodist Church.



Walter Curlee (L) instructs Davidson College student, John David Ramsey (R), as they prepare to welcome

"Then we asked for food or the money to buy food." From the beginning, the program was set up for the street people to come in on specified weekdays: Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 2:30-4 p.m. They receive a bag lunch and are able to pick from the available clothing.

"The members of First United Methodist Church has responded in a truly magnificent way," assures Curlee. "We have collected tons of clothing and the money has been donated beyond our greatest hope."

Soon afterwards, a Sunday morning session was added to the program. The street people who come are served coffee, juice and doughnuts. There is also a devotion service held at this time. Recently Curlee and volunteer aides handed out sheets of inspirational music to the people attending. Just last week Curlee

tells, "We distributed sheet music for a few simple songs. We told everyone they could keep the music if they'd like. Afterwards not one sheet was left. They wanted to take the music with them. It seemed to mean something to them."

One street person interviewed maintains, "There should be a program of ministry of the Word of God. People need to get in touch with God to make a change."

Another young man who regularly comes to the First United Methodist Program, relates, "The white people who are involved with this program are genuinely compassionate. True Christians," he

calls them. From Curlee's records, First United Methodist has served 6,392 street people since the beginning of the Society of Strangers' program last year. He says, "I'm so proud of the church backing me. There has been no negative feedback, no problem with support for the program."

"The street people who come here are almost totally humble. Most are considerate, they know our limits and they appreciate what we are doing," he comments.

During the week, when the street people receive clothing from the church, they can pick sweaters, shirts, jackets, etc., from

the racks and boxes of clothes and accessories. It is quite an experience to see the light in the faces of these people as they replace worn, overrun shoes with a pair of used but well-constructed ones.

To help with the program, students from area colleges have come through campus ministries programs. John David Ramsey, a sophomore of Davidson College, is considering an internship at the church for the upcoming summer. He comments, "This is not at all what I'm used to," referring to the street people. "I've been blessed with a good family and home. I've not been in touch with

these things." Ramsey reveals he is looking forward to the opportunity of helping people less fortunate than himself. "I feel as though I'm being led to do this. I know I will grow from this experience," he mentions.

"About two weeks later, he came in and told me that his friend, who had been hit by a car, was in the hospital. He asked us to pray for his friend. Obviously, he did care after all."

"I do not know if this made a difference," Curlee reflects, "but soon after this time he got a job and quit drinking. He has been sober now for five months."

Curlee concludes, "Here is a place the street people can come when they have nowhere else to go. Through devotion there is hope." If the street people gain nothing else from this program, suggests Curlee, they'll realize, "They're people and we are our brother's keeper and we do care."

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