

Hungry in Chattanooga

Hungry for food. Hungry for home. Hungry for attention. Hungry for love.

People in this part of town have learned to count on Forrest Avenue United Methodist Church and its pastor, the Rev. Barry Kidwell.

Some come wordlessly – with hunched shoulders and dirty fingernails – for free meals served at the church or in the park.

Some come running up to Kidwell's truck – smiling to show him their new dentures, or inviting him to rehab graduation – as he drives through their neighborhoods.

Some come because they have already been ministered to in various ways – with paid-for prescriptions or blankets on cold nights or Wal-Mart gift cards at Christmas – and so now they want to be ministers, too.



↑ Robert waits for lunch in the park.

Located near the Walnut Street Bridge, down the street from trendy boutiques and restaurants, Forrest Avenue UMC offers life support along with unconditional love to people who can tell the difference. In addition to serving free lunches to about 150 on Thursday, the 60-member congregation offers free dinner and Bible study for 100 on Wednesday night. On Thursday evening, the "Transformation" ministry provides post-incarceration aid to about 60 participants. On Sundays, the church is home to a United Methodist service in the morning, a non-denominational service in the evening. A free breakfast is also served on Sunday.

"It wasn't Methodism that brought me here," says Jimmy, age 50, a former drug abuser who now volunteers at Forrest Avenue and has opened his home as a transitional place for the homeless. "It was the fact that they offered free food first, and then Bible study was optional. Because let me tell you, I'm personally going to be a little more attentive if I have a good meal on my stomach."

"When you mess up again and again, you're ashamed to come back," says Angel, age 39, a former prostitute and recovering drug abuser. "But they always did take me back. I never knew what true love was, but the Lord just come out of Barry. Now this is our church family, and we love them and they love us."

Kidwell, who delights his neighborhood friends with his long hair and nonjudgmental ease, has to think for a minute when asked, "What makes your congregation different from others?"

"So many of these people have been involved with things and people that were untrustworthy, and so many of them have never had any love at home. They don't even know what it feels like to be loved," he says.

"We try not to promise to do anything we're not going to do, and we try to offer unconditional love. And that's why we have had the success." ■



↑ After serving a free lunch at the church in north Chattanooga, a group of volunteers stops to pray before taking hot stew downtown to an expectant crowd.



↑ Joe, 32, eat his lunch in the rain at Miller Park. He knows a lot of Bible verses and admits to struggling with alcoholism.



→ The Rev. Kidwell is a familiar sight in the northside neighborhoods of Chattanooga – so much so that the people run for his truck to share celebrations or to ask for help. Kidwell laughs with them and offers bags of food, later following through on promises to pick up prescriptions or to help chop wood.

← When the Forrest Avenue crew arrives at Miller Park with lunch, a crowd is waiting. Many step up to help unload the food. After a group prayer, the people line up for a hot bowl of food and a bagged meal to eat later. Some offer greetings and hugs for the volunteers. Some want to be left alone.



↑ Angel shares a tender moment with her fiancé, Michael. After five years of living under a bridge, the couple are happily employed as church custodians and are now living in an apartment.



↑ ABOVE: Kidwell and crew drop by for a visit with Red and Lisa, who live under the same bridge where Angel and Michael once lived. Lisa shows off the Christmas tree and ornaments she found in a trash can, then jokes about having "riverfront property." A column under the bridge says it all. →



→ "For the first time in my life, I see sincerity in religion," says Jacqueline, referring to the volunteers who served her lunch. "I don't feel the phoniness I have felt in other churches."



Photos and story by Annette Spence, *The Call*

