

■ Spirit of Luke Charitable Foundation ministers in Black Belt, 1st visit to Choctaw County last weekend

By Dee Ann Campbell
The Choctaw Sun

BIRMINGHAM, BUTLER — “How do you eat an elephant?” asks Henry Ford of the Spirit of Luke Foundation. “One bite at a time. We’ve taken the first bite.”

Their mission, they say, is to reach the Black Belt area, to give its people a little taste of hope. It is, they say, an effort to do whatever they can do to help an area of the state where hope does not readily exist.

Through the Spirit of Luke Foundation, Ford and his wife, Dr. Sondra Ford, have been providing for the health-related needs in underprivileged, underserved areas of the Black Belt. With the help of volunteers from all over the state, they not only address medical needs, but also provide clothing, food, and other forms of assistance to areas where they feel called by God to serve.

It is their way of eating the elephant one bite at a time — helping to tackle the myriad of problems that exist in this area of the state. By tackling the external needs of the communities, they say, they can tackle the most important one — their spiritual needs.

Last Saturday, the Spirit of Luke Foundation brought its ‘A Promise to Help’ ministry to Choctaw County for the first time. Setting up their mobile clinic at Graytronix, Inc. in Butler, Ford and his wife, Dr. Sondra Ford, began what they say will be the first of many trips to the county to reach those who need them.

“We treated 55 in the clinic on Saturday, and probably had close to 70



Taking a bite out of the elephant

Choctaw Sun photo by
Dee Ann Campbell

come through there altogether,” says Ford. “We also went into the community and talked and prayed with many more.”

Their visit was part of a long-term effort to reach the Black Belt counties of Alabama, an area that is known for its lack of financial resources, lack of medical care, and, most importantly to the Fords, a lack of hope.

“Medicine is just the drawing card,” says Dr. Ford. “We find mostly that the people lack hope, and the only hope we know that will really change lives is the hope of Christ. We know that the people in the Black Belt have had other programs to help financially and in other ways, but they don’t address their spiritual needs. That’s what we have been called to do because we know that God is the answer to all of it.”

The Spirit of Luke Foundation began in the heart of the Fords in January of 2002, when,

through prayer and fasting, they began to realize God’s vision for their outreach.

“God prompted us through our pastor to go on a 40-day fast,” says Mr. Ford. “During that fast, he touched our heart to do more than what we were doing. We were active in our church, but God wanted more. There was still a void there. He wanted us to do more than just sit in the pew.”

Ford says that during their fasting period, one of the visions God placed in their hearts was to reach out to the Black Belt, an area where Dr. Ford had already felt drawn to serve.

“We read a series in the Birmingham News that talked about the needs in the Black Belt,” Ford recalls. “That, coupled with what was already in my wife’s heart, and being under the influence of the Holy Spirit during our fast, God started putting it together and giving us instructions about what

He wanted us to do. We knew we were supposed to go into the Black Belt, even if it was just the two of us.”

The Fords established the ‘A Promise to Help’ ministry with a vision to reach the Black Belt with a four-fold outreach that would eventually include humanitarian, economic, educational, and spiritual components. But they were not alone in their efforts. Once their vision took root, others joined the ministry.

“Every time we told someone else about what we were doing, they said they wanted to go, too,” Ford says.

On the first Saturday of each month, they, along with a host of volunteers — including medical professionals, college students, and others — travel to a community within the region to set up a one-day outreach that touches several areas of need.

“One thing we learn from our Bible is that we need to come in feed the people, heal the people, and talk to the people,” says Ford. “We bring healing through medicine and prayer. We bring

food. We bring clothes for those with needs. We bring counselors to teach, and social workers who help people who need to get medicines for free. Then we share love of Jesus.”

Since its beginnings, the movement has grown to include many volunteers from several different denominations and from areas throughout the state. While some of their missions are smaller, reaching only a relatively few people in a community with a handful of volunteers, others are large and reach hundreds in one day using a larger number of workers.

“We had one mission where we had 22 different denominations represented by our volunteers,” Ford remembers. “There was only one reason we were able to put that kind of team together — It had to be God at work.”

The Fords put together their ministry through donations alone, relying solely on what they consider God’s provision to fund and provide materials for the missions.

“We don’t have a budget,” says Ford. “All we have is a heart to do what we can do, and over the years it’s continued to grow. We had a mobile clinic donated, a van and driver to carry our volunteers to the missions, and donations have purchased the testing supplies to do everything from blood pressure screenings to EKG’s to Hemoglobin A1C screenings.”

Although the Fords acknowledge that some other faith-based programs that reach out to people in struggling areas do receive financial assistance through state and local governmental agencies through the ‘Faith-Based Initiative’ grants, they have opted to work through a different route — one that depends solely on God to provide the necessary resources.

“When we started this, God told us that this is where He was working,” Dr. Ford says. “We’re working through the power of God, not through men’s resources because people don’t see God in that.”

“If we do all these things to reach people for Christ,” she continues, “and they see that this is a program with no funding, no resources, no budget, then they know

that there’s only one reason for it — God is doing it.”

The volunteers who ministered with the Fords in Butler on Saturday included local residents and natives of the area who felt called to join their efforts. Among them was former Choctaw County High School honor student Victoria Towner, who was valedictorian of the Class of 2003 and is now pursuing her medical degree at UAB.

“She and her mom work with us,” explains Ford. “She (Victoria) goes with us on a regular basis.”

In addition to Dr. Ford, other physicians often work with the ministry, including Choctaw County native Dr. Printella Ridgeway-Thomas, who is now practicing medicine at Northern Health Medical Center in Birmingham. Thomas was instrumental in coordinating outreaches to local youth as part of the ministry in Butler last weekend.

“Our children’s ministry includes bringing clothes, games — encouraging them,” says Ford. “We know we have to start reaching people early. The significance of our impact will not be felt that day. We’re sowing seeds of hope that when it comes to fruition it will be the catalyst to make significant change in the area. When you’re struggling everyday, it’s hard to encourage the children and give them hope that tomorrow will be better.”

For the Fords, the addition of more and more volunteers, as well as the outpouring of help through donations of materials is an outward sign of what they’ve known all along — that the ministry is being led by God. They simply have to follow his lead in order to take more bites out of the elephant of problems that exists in the Black Belt.

“We believe that we all have within us the capacity to help,” Ford says. “Therein is our mission, our commitment, our promise — ‘A Promise to Help’”

“We know now that it can be done,” he adds. “People can’t tell us now that it can’t be. We can work together to do God’s work, if we let him lead us. It’s a goal of ours to be that kind of light in the Black Belt.”

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Scripture in Focus:
Titus 2:11-14

Three-year-olds don’t understand headaches.

Kristen’s squeals had pierced my already pounding head, making me wince in pain. It was one of those headaches that grew worse with each little sound. And the sounds of a three-year-old in the house are often anything but little.

It’s been over 11 years ago, now, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. I remember the tiny details of my child’s face and the way her little feet tip-tapped through the halls. I remember a thousand bubbly giggles and a million delightful laughs — and I remember how God spoke to me through her baby voice.

But that day, all of those three-year-old sounds had been enough to push me and my pounding head to the brink. As the day had worn on and the pain of my headache increased, I felt more and more like a bear who had been awakened early from his winter’s nap.

I was cross. I was grouchy. I was anything but motherly. And I grew increasingly more impatient with Kristen’s noisy play.

My head seemed to throb more with each hour that passed, until finally I was forced to admit that it had gotten the better of me. I sank down in the recliner to close my eyes for a few stolen moments of quiet.

But Kristen had other



Looking Deeper

By Dee Ann Campbell
Editor

plans. No sooner had I closed my eyes than she bounded into my lap, singing a never ending stream of songs. Each song seemed a little louder than the previous one, her voice reaching a crescendo that rattled every inch of my aching head.

Finally, this Mama had had enough! I did the unthinkable. I did what every parent, at some harried moment in the madness called parenthood, resorts to in moments like these when splitting headaches and three-year-olds collide. I yelled.

“Kristen!” my angry voice startled her. “Stop singing for just a few minutes! You are driving me crazy!”

One millisecond later I regretted my words. As soon as they were out of my mouth, I wished that I could take them back. The hurt look on my baby’s face was enough to cause untold remorse. But her next words cut my heart into.

“I...I was just gonna sing you a song,” she said. “I was gonna sing you ‘Amazing Gwace.’” And her sweet little voice began her song:

Amazing Gwace how

sweet da sound dat saved a wetch wike me!

Oh, what a way you have, Lord, of showing me the truth! You use the voice of a toddler in the midst of a bad day to remind me of my wretchedness and Your perfect love. You show me in the most unexpected ways that, even though I am so imperfect, impatient, and unlovable, you still extend to me your Amazing Gwace.

LOOKING DEEPER

More scriptures to ponder this week:

Proverbs 17:27-28

John 1:16

Romans 5:20-21

1 Timothy 1:13-14

Ephesians 1:3-8

Romans 3:21-24

COMMITTING IT TO MEMORY

Verse of the week:

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” Titus 2:11.

(ED. NOTE: This is the first in a year-long devotional series from *Monday Morning Meditations for Moms*, a devotional collection by Dee Ann Campbell. Devotionals will appear in each Friday edition of the Sun.)