

**CMBA Churches Impacting Communities Despite Unusual Season**

COVID-19 may have disrupted weekly church schedules and operations for a time, but it has not dampened the spirit of CMBA churches determined to impact their communities with the hope of the gospel. Some outreach ministries continued during the quarantine and ReGathering periods, with other churches reporting the start of new ministries birthed during this season. CMBA Ministry Mobilizer Cathy Locklear assists churches with community connections and resources related to a variety of missions opportunities.

“I really enjoy coming alongside what the churches are already doing and supporting them in their ministries,” Locklear says.

During the last six months, hunger relief has been one of the most active CMBA ministries as churches have worked to meet critical individual and family needs in the community. The association warehouses shelf-stable foods at Belmont Baptist. Food is largely replenished through CMBA church donations and occasionally from community partners, such as a sizeable donation made from The Cooperative Ministry in August. When a church food pantry needs additional supplies Locklear coordinates filling the request.

“This ministry is really about churches sharing with churches. A church that donates food may not know the end of the story or how the gospel was shared or how lives were touched but, because they shared through giving, they are a vital part of meeting that need,” Locklear says.

During the recent COVID-19-impacted months, hunger relief ministries at Grace Fellowship, Hope, Fort Clark, Southeast Community Church, Rosewood, Concord and Second Union have all been supplemented from the CMBA collected food supplies. Rosewood’s food pantry never closed during quarantine, remaining available to guests for prayer and food supplies every Wednesday from 4-6 p.m. The pantry also received CMBA grant assistance for this ministry. Servant Leader Coordinator Tori Hodge says while they have seen an increase in activity, Rosewood is “relying on God every week to fill those shelves.”

Operating out of a rural part of Kershaw County, Concord’s food pantry experiences a high volume of guests from as far away as Lexington and Lancaster and often needs additional food supplied from the association. Pastor Steve Reynolds says his church’s ministry has served for over a decade and distributes meats, dairy and fresh produce in addition to non-perishable goods. Pre-COVID, the pantry served 400-600 people a month and in the last month alone it served almost 1,400 individuals. Reynolds marvels that, regardless of numbers, God always provides enough food to bless the community and sharing the gospel with each guest is a personal blessing to him.

“Everyone who comes for food comes into the sanctuary first to listen to a short message and is presented with the gospel. Honestly, this has been some of the most fun I have ever had preaching the Word. The people we serve are very culturally diverse but, for those few minutes, we are the Church and we are having church,” Reynolds says, adding one guest who was a former heroin addict began attending worship services and eventually prayed to receive Christ.

Locklear is passionate about this important element of Community Impact Ministries – that CMBA churches incorporate personal interaction and relationship-building into these efforts. Meeting needs is important but, through relationship, people are often more open to hearing about the gospel. Many CMBA churches are building relationships in their communities through opportunities like Heart4Schools, which connects volunteers with local schools to help with mentoring and backpack ministries.

Angela McNeal, director of church and community ministries with the South Carolina Baptist Convention, oversees Heart4Schools. She says Shandon, Spring Valley and North Trenholm are among a larger group of churches around the state that have also maintained E-Learning Centers, which provide childcare for students learning virtually while their parents are at work. McNeal shares that St. Andrews, Kingdom Life Church and Shandon have also provided supplies to their local schools. Before the school year started, Locklear helped connect McNeal with several CMBA churches that had previously expressed interest in helping with a backpack ministry, including Blaney, Fort Clark, Harmony and Hope.

“Churches like to serve their community. As Angela helps match existing needs in the CMBA area, I can connect her with potential partner churches,” Locklear explains of her role.

Typically a church builds relationships with the local school and learns of needs but, in the case of this backpack ministry opportunity, McNeal was contacted by school districts in need. She describes churches as being the “hands and feet of Jesus” when they collect or purchase food sent home in backpacks for school children. By doing this, she says churches are “making a difference in the quality of life for these children and letting them know that there is someone who cares about them. Some churches also create relationships with the entire family to let them know of the love of our Heavenly Father.”

WMU is another important CMBA Community Impact Ministry and is coordinated by Rev. Ralphetta Davis, women’s ministry leader at Concord Fellowship. She is currently working to assemble a leadership team to help CMBA churches in the work of WMU from evangelism and missions to disciple-making for men, women and children of all ages. Davis calls this vital ministry the “catalyst” for churches looking to accomplish the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

“WMU is an important ministry for CMBA churches to support and encourage members to participate in simply because it is a mandate from Jesus that we would go into all the world,” she says.

James Goodwin is an associate minister at St. Mark Baptist and has participated in prison ministry and mission trips with the CMBA. Recently, he reached out to Locklear to ask about possible ministries his church could become involved in when they ReGather in a few months.

“I always like the work of the association and have worked with them for years. I like the ministries they have and how they try and reach people in different areas like the fair ministry, prisons, hunger and clothing ministries and schools. They keep working for the Lord,” Goodwin shares.

Locklear loves to answer calls from folks like Goodwin, and she has several new partnership opportunities to share with CMBA churches. Oliver Gospel Mission is welcoming CMBA churches to join Grace Fellowship, who already helps serve prepared meals and engages with guests there. Locklear suggests some churches may want to host a conversation time in Oliver Gospel’s new courtyard serving something simple like ice cream sandwiches. Active CMBA member churches should note they are invited to reserve the newly renovated Block Party Trailer at no charge through the end of 2020, perfect for hosting outdoor evangelistic events.

Some CMBA annual ministries were cancelled this year, including the prison picnic. But others have continued, like Prisoner Packets which will be collected at St. Andrews on Dec. 7. Locklear says of COVID-19’s impacts “where participation may be cut off in one avenue, it’s continuing in another.”

For more information or to start connecting with one of these Community Impact Ministries, contact Cathy Locklear at 803.622.0303 or by email at cathylocklear@ColumbiaMetro.org.