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Churches respond to needs in COVID-19 crisis

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Monday, March 16, 2020 (one month ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- The needs of communities around the U.S. have been growing in midst of the COVID-19 global crisis.

With many families unable to maintain proper childcare in light of schools shutting down, college students without a place to live and insecure communities without essential household items, churches are stepping in to bring practical aid.

Green Hill Church in Mt. Juliet, Tenn., has jumped in to help bring food to those who normally rely on school meals for their children.

Rickey Baxley, administrative pastor at Green Hill Church, said they are partnering with the local food pantry and elementary schools.

"Many students receive two meals a day from their school and with schools being out, there was an immediate need to make sure food was available to those students within the community," Baxley said.



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Baxley said Green Hill will offer prepared food boxes to families in need in the mornings at the church. Each box will provide three to four meals for a family of four.

A local company also donated fresh fruit and produce for families to retrieve from the church, Baxley said.

In addition to the boxed meals available in the mornings, Baxley said each evening the church will have full meals ready to be picked up.

"They won't even have to get out of their car," Baxley explained, "[They] just pull up and let us know how many meals are needed, and our volunteers will bring them to their vehicle."

Baxley said as of 11 a.m. Monday (March 16), they have provided meals for 10 families and anticipate a growing number in the coming week.

"We are grateful for the privilege of continuing to meet the needs of our community as this season keeps rolling and look forward to using this as a platform to meet the immediate needs and to share the Gospel," Baxley said. The church's community was hit hard just two weeks ago, when a tornado tore through Mt. Juliet, destroying homes and taking lives.

Immanuel Nashville, also in middle Tennessee, has been making an effort to help find housing for college students displaced by the canceling of in-person classes and campuses closing down.

Barnabas Piper, director for community at Immanuel, said when the church heard of local universities' decision to move all residential students off campus they acted immediately.

"Those who minister on-campus were quick to notify the church staff and put out word on social media so we could begin to mobilize," Piper said. "We realized that many of the students most likely to be stranded were international students who could not easily return home because of visa issues, cost and COVID-19 related restrictions."

Piper sent out a request to Immanuel's small groups and discipleship groups to see if anyone had rooms or apartments available and within a few hours heard from more than 20 individuals offering housing accommodations.

"We were also put in touch with a number of campus ministries who had banded together to care for students," Piper said. "This allowed us to connect with a number of international students and find them housing through the end of the school year."

Piper noted that the eagerness of the church to serve the community has been an amazing thing to see unfold.

"Collectively, the church stepped up to care for people in a time of crisis," Piper said. "I didn't even have to facilitate or try to create momentum because the people were so ready to be good neighbors. I simply took the opportunity to give them a chance, and they ran with it."

Dean Inserra, pastor of City Church in Tallahassee, Fla., encouraged churches to join in with already existing local efforts to aid their communities.

"Don't feel like you have to create a new ministry or a new program," Inserra said. "That could be overwhelming, and a lot of times out of our expertise."

Inserra encouraged church leaders not to fear simply pointing their congregation toward efforts that are already happening.

City Church is working to meet financial needs by directing some of their giving to a local food bank, Second Harvest Food Bank, that is putting together meals, rather than try to start their own meal providing efforts.

"We're big on not reinventing the wheel or trying to do our own thing when there's already stuff happening with people who do this kind of thing regularly," Inserra said. "You're going to see us [City Church] join existing ministries and see how we can help them."

City Church has also been in a longstanding partnership with a local high school and has made themselves available to whatever needs may continue to arise in the coming weeks.

"We are ready to mobilize and help that school in any way we can." Inserra said.

"Our church wants to know right away, 'what are we doing?' [to help]," Inserra said. "Our church expects that to happen. That's just how our church thinks. We'll have people that definitely get on board."

As communities continue to be heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the opportunities for churches to come alongside those in need will increase.

For more information on the current status of COVID-19, visit the World Health Organization website and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website.

Tess Schoonhoven is a Baptist Press staff writer.

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