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## Texas Acteens group stays on mission while social distancing

by Trennis Henderson, posted Friday, April 17, 2020 (10 days ago)

GARLAND, Texas (BP) -- Missions discipleship is personal for Mary Lou Sinclair and her Acteens group -- even amid a pandemic.

Sinclair has served as the Acteens director at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland, Texas, for more than 20 years. During that time, five of her Acteens have been named National Acteens Panelists, and three others have been selected as Top Teens. They also have traveled extensively over the years to participate in mission trips, state and national Woman's Missionary Union annual meetings and Blume, a national missions gathering for girls.

A close-knit group that reflects the church's multicultural community, the Acteens describe themselves as family and thrive on frequent fellowship among the teens and their adult mentors. Based on their close connections, the 6th- through 12th-grade girls refuse to let coronavirus-induced social distancing and sheltering in place derail their missions and ministry focus.

"We can't begin to understand what is happening right now," Sinclair acknowledged, "but we, as Christians, can be sure that there will be some good that comes out of all of this."

On a practical level, Sinclair asked Marisol Sandoval, one of Freeman Heights' youth ministers, to set up virtual Acteens meetings online to keep the group connected.

Sandoval, a former Top Teen who grew up under Sinclair's leadership, now serves alongside Sinclair as an Acteens leader.



Acteens at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland, Texas, meet via Zoom video conferencing while sheltering in place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo courtesy of Marisol Sandoval



Acteens at Freeman Heights Baptist Church in Garland, Texas, visit together earlier this year before social distancing restrictions were implemented. The group is pursuing creative ways to maintain their missions and ministry focus amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Photo by Pam Henderson/WMU

"I had to learn everything I could about Zoom," Sandoval said of her initiative to transition the group's meetings to video conferencing. "It's worked out pretty awesome. The girls are adapting well. They want to be with us. They want to see us. They want to hear from us. It's been really neat that we have the ability to use technology for our Acteens meetings."

Sinclair said their virtual meetings still include several typical features such as "praying for people in our church, praying for national and state WMU, having our lesson and having Bible study."

The group continues to serve through various missions projects, including a virtual prayer walk of their neighborhood using GPS mapping. They also plan to sew protective masks for residents in area apartment buildings and send letters of encouragement to members of a local Chinese Christian church who may be feeling ostracized as some Chinese-Americans have been harassed on social media and elsewhere.

Sinclair said the goal of the letters simply is to say to fellow Christians, "We're praying for you, we're so thankful that you're here and safe and we want you to know that we care about you."

Long before the widespread impact of the coronavirus crisis, the Freeman Heights Acteens have been known as one of the most active youth mission groups in Texas Baptist life.

The girls regularly volunteer at the ROC (Re'Creation Outreach Center), a community ministry center that provides a food pantry, clothes closet, after-school tutoring, Bible studies and a host of other ministries and activities for children, youth and adults. The group has continued to serve while abiding by social distancing guidelines.

"The ROC is really the home base for several faith communities in the Garland area," explained Adam Wood, director of the ROC and lead pastor of The Neighborhood Church in Garland. "Ultimately, it's a hub of Gospel ministry within the area. One of the marks of effective community ministry is when the people you are serving become people who serve. One of the places we've seen that most is with this strong group of teenagers. This group of girls has become servants, not just those who are served. I think it's in large part because of their connection with Mary Lou and the Freeman Heights youth group."

As her Acteens navigate a new normal, Sinclair stresses the importance of ongoing missions commitment.

"Mary Lou is one of those people who does whatever's needed," said Larry Venable, her longtime pastor at Freeman Heights. "What she has done with Acteens is fabulous, just teaching them spiritually, getting them involved in mission activity and growing. ... She's definitely captivated by her relationship with Christ and the Gospel."

Nayely Vallejo, one of the National Acteens Panelists nurtured by Sinclair, also helps lead Acteens alongside her mentor.

"Because of Mary Lou and because of how she's raised us as GAs and Acteens, it's just natural for us to serve everyone any chance we get," Vallejo said.

With this summer's national WMU annual meeting cancelled and Blume postponed until 2021, Sandoval said their Acteens "are sad but they're fine."

While coping with social distancing, loneliness and disappointment, "I think there's been a lot of growth spiritually," Sandoval reflected. "This has definitely taken us out of our comfort zone. We know from looking in the Bible that whenever we're taken outside of our comfort zone, there's growth, and we learn to trust in God. We learn how important relationships are.

"It's hard because we can't really go and hug them. That's one of the hardest things for this social distancing, because you just want to hug them and just comfort them, and you have to trust God that He's there to comfort them and love on them."

Before the current crisis erupted, Sinclair said she was involved in event planning with a group of state WMU leaders who "talked about being the hands of God and being able to use the tools that we have in our hands to do ministry."

During a recent follow-up video conference call, "we talked about how the things in our hands are totally different than what they were before," she said. "But God finds a way and we just have to be looking for how He can use us to do His ministry."



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Photo by Pam Henderson/WMU