

Keith Akins (left), pastor of the Church at Southside, talks with church member Don Garner as they and others prepare to serve a hot meal before the service starts. The church meets in a parking lot in order to serve the homeless community of downtown Birmingham.

‘God is at work’



Photo by Grace Thornton

Church at Southside gathers homeless together as its congregation in Birmingham parking lot

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Jason Albers grew up in a Baptist church, and for a long time he made a living as an opening shift supervisor for Ryan’s steakhouse.

“When they would start a new restaurant I would go in and train them on how to open the store,” he said.

And then life came crashing down — his wife and son died. One thing led to another and in 2000, Albers started living in a tent near the railroad tracks in Birmingham.

He’s been there ever since.

“I pretty much know everybody on the streets, and everybody knows me,” Albers said.

But a few years back somebody different started showing up in the city’s homeless camps — Keith Akins, a McCalla native who felt God calling him to start something new.

“We looked into church planting, and we didn’t know exactly what that was going to look like, but we wanted to go into some of the dark and forgotten places in the city that people are leaving,” he said.

So Akins moved his family into Birmingham’s Southside and started hanging out with Albers and others who called the city streets home. Akins and some of his friends would go to the homeless camps, cook on Coleman stoves and share a meal with the homeless. Sometimes they would gather up as many people as they could and take them to restaurants.

No matter where they ate one thing was sure — they had no lack of things to talk about.

“It was like reading the gospel,” Akins said. “Jesus loved to sit down and share a meal. We would just sit down, eat and just have normal conversations. We built some strong relationships.”

And over the course of that three years he talked to them a lot about Jesus — and a lot about church. By that time he had started one in his home and it had grown into needing a building of its own. The Church at Southside was flourishing, but more than anything Akins wanted it to be a place where anyone felt comfortable.

So he asked them if they would come. And they said no.

“I was always met with stories about how they didn’t have the right clothes. I would tell them this is different, they could come just as they are, but they would say, ‘No, I’ve been to church before,’ and then tell me horrific stories,” Akins said. “It broke my heart.”

And as his church continued to meet in a leased space in Southside in hopes of including the homeless, in three years not one homeless person came through the doors.

“I remember asking God, ‘I know you’ve put them on my heart — what do you want me to do?’ and I felt the Spirit urging me — ‘Why don’t you go to them?’”

Unanimous vote

At that point, Akins said, the Church at Southside was nearing the end of its lease, and the congregation of around 40 voted unanimously not to renew it.

“We didn’t know exactly what it would look like,” he said, “but we thought — what if we let the church be mobile?”

They got a food truck and started filling it with food and supplies, and they pulled up in a parking lot downtown and met there.

‘It was just us’

“For three weeks nobody showed up, and it was just us,” Akins said.

But he remembers vividly the first couple who came — Paul and Amanda.

“We had doughnuts and juice, and we gave them every doughnut we had and told them we’d be there again next week, to bring their friends,” Akins said.

That was the first Sunday of November 2016, and they haven’t missed a Sunday since, rain or shine. Those first two people grew to six, then 10, and now more than 100 show up every Sunday to the parking lot where they meet behind Intermark ad agency.

Every Sunday morning they serve a hot meal prepared by people in the church, then eat together and have a worship service. In the past two years the church has served more than 10,000 meals.

After the service each person there is given a bag of canned food and dry goods.

Albers is the one who unloads the van and packs up the food bags.

“It’s not a snack bag,” Albers said. “We actually give a meal like a can of beef stew, pork, chicken or tuna fish — something that’s going to stick to your gut.”

The church, he said, is a great place to come.

“It’s not your normal church. It started off, it was basically Keith and his wife, Jamie, and a handful of other people. But it got around and got around and got around,” he said. “I love helping out. Keith and Jamie keep me grounded. As much as they’ve

done for me, I want to help them.”

Akins said they want to welcome everyone with open arms, no matter what their life looks like. If there’s sin the love of Jesus will meet that — but they have to meet Him first, he said.

“It’s people from all different walks of life,” Akins said. “Not all of the people who come are homeless — some are in lower income housing and apartments around there.”

And not all of them are jobless. Albers, for instance, works with a landscaping company.

But all have deep needs, Akins said.

He remembers one Sunday after an uncharacteristic snowstorm that they pulled in to find a very

hungry crowd waiting for them.

“The people they normally went to for meals had been snowed in for a couple of days, so they hadn’t been able to eat,” he said. “It broke my heart. The needs are great.”

But even so the people there are an example of the widow’s mite in action, he said. Oftentimes churchgoers will bring money or food they’ve found during the week so that they can give it away to people who need it more.

‘Beautiful picture’

“It’s a beautiful picture of the kingdom of God,” Akins said. “This whole thing, God’s been great in it. There’s buy in and it’s beautiful. We don’t have it all figured out but God is at work.”

For more information, visit churchatsouthside.com.

REFLECTIONS

