

# connections

Working Together to Grow the Kingdom

LEADERSHIP NETWORK®

## Blessings in a Backpack

NOURISHING  
KIDS WHO NEED  
IT MOST

**FEATURED CHURCH:** Trinity Baptist Church

**LOCATION:** Mount Pleasant, Texas

**ESTABLISHED:** Feb. 6, 1983

**SERVICES:** 3 weekly

**AVERAGE ATTENDANCE:** 600

For the mission-minded members of Trinity Baptist Church in Mount Pleasant, Texas, the focus has always been the community and those outside the church's walls. But since joining Leadership Network's Missional Renaissance Leadership Community, pastor Mike Kessler has witnessed a change in his congregation.

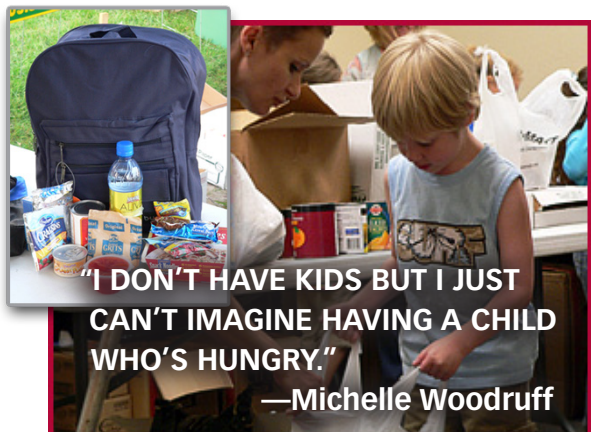
"We're making a paradigm shift from invitational events and volunteer involvement in the community to a more concentrated ministry effort through government, business and social service domains," Kessler says.

Looking for opportunities to plug in, Trinity Baptist joined other local fellowships in supporting Titus County Cares (TCC), a nonprofit umbrella organization of 13 agencies that minister to the economically disadvantaged.

Michelle Woodruff, Trinity's community relations contact, serves as secretary and chief cheerleader for the project. "It's awesome how God has broken down barriers between denominations so TCC can be the resource center for the county," Michelle says.

Through TCC, Michelle runs the largest backpack program in East Texas, targeting children from HeadStart to high school who are at poverty-level and below. A backpack distributed every Friday provides weekend meals for children who would otherwise go hungry.

With no seed money and no idea how she would make it happen, Michelle began asking people in the community for their support. Pastor Kessler didn't hesitate. The church offered transportation to pick up food and deliver backpacks, the space to store it all, and even financial support.



Kids fill backpacks for the Trinity Baptist Church backpack program.

Michelle's next dilemma was how to fill all of those backpacks. Enter Trinity children's minister Dawna Land and youth minister Jimmy Reynolds, who said, "Why can't our kids do it? We want them to be a part of blessing other children."

Dear Titus County cares;  
Thank you for giving us food  
for the weekends It is good.  
It really helps my family and me.  
It is really nice to have a  
backpack full of food to bring home

Today the program delivers 711 backpacks each week to 19 schools in three counties. For an entire school year, \$136—just \$4 a week—feeds one child. Michelle has lowered her program's cost per child through food drives and a special arrangement with the Tyler, Texas, food bank.

So far, 58,978 pounds of food have been distributed at a cost of \$17,116.77 for the 2008-2009 school year. That's only \$0.29 per pound for 15,623 backpacks. At 711 backpacks per week, that's \$0.97 to feed a child for an entire weekend.

### MORE THAN NUTRITION

Not only do the kids treasure their packs, they also look forward to seeing what's inside every week. Good nutrition is an important goal, Michelle affirms, but so is giving children the chance to enjoy being kids. Much of the food is unlike anything they get at home. The anticipation is half the fun. The kids love the individually portioned packages and snacks.

Sometimes, an unexpected treat is tucked within. Volunteers try to include a special item at Christmas-time, for example. Plans are in place to include prayer journals and perhaps a small bible.

The program also fosters a sense of responsibility. "They take such good care of their backpacks," says Michelle. Only seven have been lost since the program started—a major feat for school-aged children.

"Food is meeting their needs so that we can share the real reason for the backpack," Michelle says. She credits that bit of wisdom to her mentor, Reverend Chung, who runs a men's shelter in Longview, Texas.

## WHAT LEADERSHIP NETWORK MEANS TO ME



"Attending a Leadership Network meeting helped me focus on a vision and steps to reach the ultimate goal of blessing children. Listening to others share their experiences and how they pursued their goals generated a spark in me. Because of God's spark, the backpack program is blessed and has become a consuming fire for our community.

—Michelle Woodruff  
Community Relations, Trinity Baptist Church

## CAUSE CELEB

Titus County Cares' backpack program recently joined forces with Blessings in a Backpack, a nonprofit organization in Louisville, Ky., founded by former tennis pro Stan Curtis in 2005. With more than 10,000 children in eight states on the program, Blessings in a Backpack is actively supported by pop star Hilary Duff, who provides more than 6,000 meals at Normandie Elementary School in South Central Los Angeles, Calif., and rocker Sammy Hagar who helps feed students in 10 St. Louis, Mo., public schools. Michelle already has received 1,200 backpacks for the 2009-2010 school year, and the search is on for a sponsor for the East Texas program.



For more information, visit [www.blessingsinabackpack.com](http://www.blessingsinabackpack.com).

When she wondered how she could reach the children, Reverend Chung responded, "Michelle, you cannot preach louder than their stomachs are growling."

"That really made me think," Michelle says. "I can tell them about Jesus all day long, but not until we meet their needs can they start to pay attention." Recent student performance bears this out. Attendance and test scores for children in the backpack program are on the rise. Behavior, social skills and self-esteem have all improved.

### THE MOMENTUM BUILDS

Surprisingly, the backpack program was not an easy sell. "It's not a popular ministry," Michelle says. "People do not like to think that children in their community are going hungry. It takes time for God to give everyone the eyes to see."

However, some people were easy to convince. School superintendents, for example, welcomed the program. "It's something that can be done discreetly and lets the parents know we really care about their children," says Michelle. Now other groups are clamoring to get involved. "When people see how huge a blessing it is, everybody wants to be a part of it. The opportunities are so exciting and the possibilities are limitless."

For Michelle, few things are more fulfilling. "Everything we do is volunteer-based—from the TCC office to the backpack program. Yes, it takes a lot of time, but the rewards of working for God are so much greater than any money you can ever receive. It's truly amazing." **LN**