

Arbor Hill Provides Shelter



But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 NKJV

Left: Becky and Lee Reid
(File photo: Arbor Hill)

Homelessness is a complex and challenging reality in virtually every region of the country, including the City of Staunton. Community solutions require a multi-faceted response, including logistics for transportation and feeding programs, financial resources to provide cots, sleeping bags and pillows, and volunteers to assist with serving the food and providing a level of care. After dozens of meetings and discussions with other churches and community agencies about the area's homeless population, members of the Arbor Hill congregation offered a simple proposition: There are people who are homeless, and we have a fellowship hall. How can we make this work? One week later, on March 13, they opened their church seven days a week to those in the Staunton area who did not have a warm place to sleep at night. The shelter will remain open until April 15, as the cold weather dictates.

Arbor Hill Pastor Lee Reid said local leaders were great to work with, especially Augusta County Fire and Rescue, the Augusta County Sheriff's Office and the Staunton City Council. One councilwoman coordinates daily breakfast for the new program. Reid observed, "We have made Jesus relevant in the secular community for at least a little bit."

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When asked how the congregation came to undertake this ministry, Reid remembered his path in life that had brought him face-to-face with people who were homeless over the years. Citing Romans 5:8, Reid asserted, “We said yes because Christ said yes to us first.” He elaborated, “I look at it this way. It is like grace with presence. Those who were rejected are now accepted.” Arbor Hill is stepping up to demonstrate what loving your neighbor looks like.

This year on Maundy Thursday, the congregation will go one step further and hold their Love Feast with their guests in the fellowship hall turned shelter. This gesture holds special meaning for Reid, who recalled his foray into the Church of the Brethren. Before 2008, he was worshipping with an Episcopal congregation when he visited Mountain View Fellowship McGaheysville and felt a transformation through the first Love Feast he attended there. He later joined the church and eventually worked in various ministries, from the unofficial chaplain at the area’s WARM shelter and the official interim chaplain at Valley Mission for a year. He and his wife, Becky, have also had a ministry launched through Hope Chapel called Grace Happens for the past fifteen years. During the warmer months, Grace Happens offers a free cookout in Gypsy Hill Park every other Sunday evening, followed by a praise and worship service. It is attended by people who are homeless, as well as passers-by who happen to be visiting the park. They have had 28,000 people over the years at these services. These ministries laid the foundation for accepting a call to be licensed to the ministry at Arbor Hill in January of this year and, subsequently, six weeks later, embracing this sheltering program.

The shelter has been open for almost two weeks, yet the transformations taking place involve more than the eight to twelve guests they average each night. Reid reports that one congregational volunteer was tentative about working with the shelter program but testified recently that she walked in with fear and walked out with love. He summarized, “When we focus on what we’re here for, the Spirit can work through the process.”

Reid said Arbor Hill wants to provide a warm cot and do it well. However, the congregation is not standing alone in this outreach. Reid explained that there has been great cooperation with various governmental agencies and medical facilities. Other congregations, including many Methodist congregations, participate with Arbor Hill in delivering the service. Congregations from the Shenandoah District have provided meals, volunteers, and supplies, including Middle River, Lebanon, and Staunton. Jack Glover, who also serves in ministry at Arbor Hill, is involved notably as the popcorn popper for movie night. Devotional services are provided as the Spirit leads, and sometimes discussions simply take place organically around the table as individuals ask about the nature of God.

Reid concluded, “When I was ‘there,’ I couldn’t see ‘here,’” reflecting on his journey in ministry. He noted, “And the same may be true for those who stay in the shelter.” He has faith that these simple acts of love and grace will lead to the transformation of many lives as they experience God's love first-hand.

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