

We're a bridge: small church responsible for big works. Lee Davenport. Bristol Herald Courier. August 16, 1999.



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Pastor Ronnie Collins's small church, Spirit & Truth Full Gospel Baptist, has created several community aid programs. Collins is shown at Kingsport's Renaissance Center, where the church holds services.

'We're a bridge'

Small church responsible for big works

By **LEE DAVENPORT**

Bristol Herald Courier

KINGSFORT — It all began with one troubled young man. Tylee Henry was a promising high school athlete and a likely candidate for a college scholarship, but one mistake could have cost him everything were it not for a Kingsport minister. Henry had been an adult only nine days in August 1997 when he got into a fight involv-

ing a large group of black and white teens. Police charged him with disorderly conduct

and inciting a riot.

Folks

you should know

The young man could have gone to jail, but a judge instead decided to allow the 41-year-old preacher to take Henry under his wing.

From that first pairing was

born a ministry that in two short years has reached thousands of people.

"We're a bridge between where people are now and where they can go," Pastor Ronnie Collins said of two non-profit organizations that grew out of his experience with Henry — Joshua Generation and My Brother's Keeper.

'We weren't whining, griping and complaining about racism but were actually doing something.'

— **Ronnie Collins**

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"We're going into the streets, into the 'hoods, finding people who are angry, people who are selling drugs to get food, selling food stamps to buy other things, prostituting themselves," he said.

"God never left the poor, the underprivileged. He never left the criminals, the wicked, the sinners," Collins said. "He never left the bad boys and girls to the government. He left them to his church to take care of, and that's what we're doing."

Collins and the members of his church, Spirit & Truth Full Gospel Baptist, now do a lot more than mentor troubled teens. They hand out food to the needy, give scholarships and free school supplies to kids and help the poor find jobs and get off welfare.

What is surprising to many people, Collins said, is that most of the poor his organizations help are white.

"People say 'Why are all these black folks taking all their money and giving to all these poor white people?'" he said.

"Well, I believe that if Christ was here, he wouldn't look at what color people were. God said 'Feed the poor,' and if the poor are white, Chinese, Mexican, Native American, I really don't care. We're going to feed them."

It's the right thing to do, he said, but in addition to that, the philosophy goes a long way toward eroding racist attitudes.

"When you get food from us, inside the bag, there is a flier with my face and my wife's face on it," Collins said. "When these white folks open up these bags, they see a black face feeding them. They

see black folks feeding their children, giving them diapers, milk. All of a sudden, they don't hate black people anymore."

So far this year, My Brother's Keeper has handed out enough canned goods and staples to feed 10,000 people for a week. It was a monumental task, considering the organization is a small one.

Collins' church has fewer than two dozen members and it doesn't even have a building. Instead, it rents a space every Sunday at the Renaissance Center.

But Collins and members of his congregation don't mind.

"Instead of putting money into mortar and bricks, we have decided we will build people and that we'll deal with a group of people that's being ignored — the poor, low-income, drug-dealers, prostitutes, the bad people that most people would rather see just go to jail," he said.

Also a monumental task was giving out 2,000 bags of school supplies this weekend through Back-To-School Jam, a program to give low-income kids in Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee the tools they need to stay in school and excel.

The program was so successful that Tennessee's governor, Don Sundquist, declared Saturday "Back-To-School Jam Day."

Collins couldn't have done it without a great deal of support from community leaders and local businesses, he said, including a Kingsport office-supply store.

But the support wasn't always there.

"When we first started this, we were hated," he said. "Instead of getting cooperation, we got the opposite."

Some people believed that through his courtroom activism — which includes finding attorneys for those who otherwise would have been appointed a public defender — he was trying to keep drug dealers out of jail.

"That is just wrong," Collins said. "We want them to pay for what they've done, but we want it to be fair. Don't give them three times the sentence because they're black or poor and can't afford a good attorney."

Slowly, the community began to get a better understanding of what Joshua Generation and My Brother's Keeper were trying to do, he said.

"When we began feeding people, trying to get rid of the drug dealers, telling prostitutes 'You don't need to be doing this with your body,' getting scholarships for people, they realized we were doing something besides just talking about racism.

"We weren't whining, griping and complaining about racism but were actually doing something," Collins said. "Those who didn't like us started to love us."

My Brother's Keeper also helps the poor pay their electric and gas bills and make their rent.

"Most of the people we deal with say 'My daddy was poor, Mom was poor, I'm poor and it's always going to be this way,'" Collins said. "We tell people they can stop that through education and with a little help.

"We deal with them from the perspective that God created them, and God didn't create junk, he didn't create them to be poor and stay poor," he said. "We want to encourage them to go to the next level."