

Johnson City Press

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Lending a hand Pastor develops programs to help needy

By John Thompson

Elizabethton Bureau

ELIZABETHTON — Residents of South Hills Estates got a surprise visit Thursday afternoon.

A group of two black men and two black women energetically knocked on doors and greeted each resident of the public housing development with a smile and two bags of groceries.

The symbolism of blacks giving food to poor white people was not lost on Elder Ronnie W. Collins, who is senior pastor of Spirit and Truth Full Gospel Baptist Church in Kingsport.

Collins knows that poor people have the same needs, whatever their race or beliefs. That is why he started a program called My Brother's Keeper. The program distributes food to a different poor neighborhood every month.

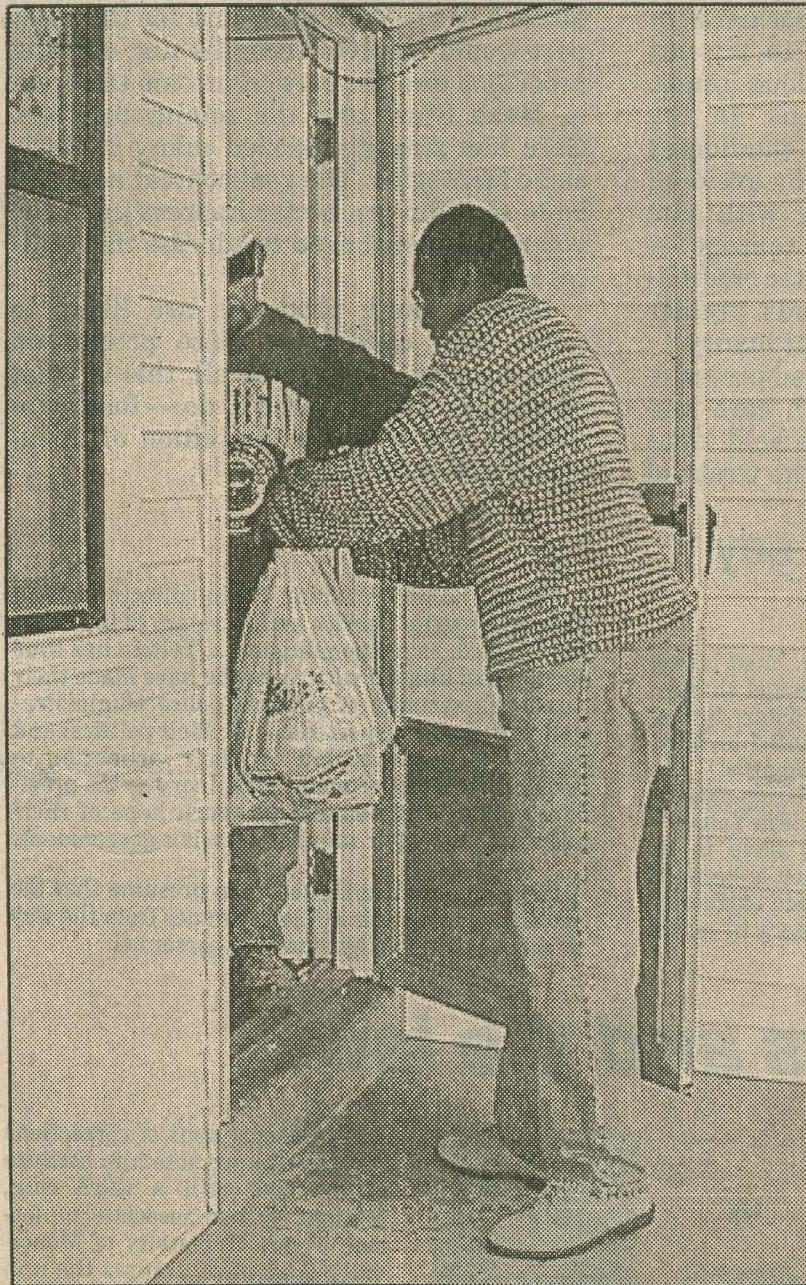
He and his congregation have distributed 80,000 pounds of food in Kingsport, Johnson City, Elizabethton, Knoxville, Nashville, Roanoke, and they are headed to Dayton, Ohio, next.

In ministering to the poor in each town, Collins is gently chiding the larger churches in these communities. He hopes they will become more concerned with helping their neighbors and less with spending on brick and mortar for a larger church building.

"We don't even have a place to store our food, but the money we receive is going to the poor," said Collins. He quoted Jesus: "In as much as you have done it unto the least of my brethren, so you have done it unto me."

He hopes to build up a network of My Brother's Keepers partners to reach his goal of feeding 5,000 people per month in the region. He said it could be done if 1,000 partners were to donate \$4 per month.

Each gift is enough food to feed a family for a week. With his lim-



Staff Photo by Tony Duncan

Elder Ronnie W. Collins hands out food baskets

strategically plans his visits for the end of the month, when welfare checks are gone but the

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food from Second Harvest Food Bank. It supplements that with help from White's Food Stores and Kern's Bakery.

But food is only one of the things that poor people need. Collins is developing programs that will help the poor at every stage of their life.

This includes a program to provide free diapers for babies of the poorest single mothers. He holds back-to-school jams which help provide poor school children with school supplies. This year he supplied 3,000 children with supplies. Only five percent of those children were black. He also has a program to provide new clothing for children.

For older students, he has developed a program which provides \$500 scholarships to North Carolina State Technical Community College. He has also provided a \$500 scholarship to a student attending North Carolina State University.

For dropouts he has a program to help them get their General Equivalency Diploma. He also has a ministry for those in prison.

"We are not trying to build up a church building, we are trying to build up people," said Collins.

He again quoted Christ, "For I was hungry and you gave me meat, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. Naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me."

More information can be obtained about My Brother's Keeper by writing Spirit & Truth FGBC, P.O. Box 3390, Kingsport, TN 37664-3390.