

LAZARUS MINISTRIES OFFERS COMPASSION IN KANSAS CITY'S URBAN CORE

Article by ROBERT FOLSOM, Special to The Star ■ Photos by SUSAN PFANNMULLER

Many people are familiar with the story of Lazarus from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus restores the man to life after he has been dead for four days.

It's one of two Bible accounts that are the namesake of Lazarus Ministries at Grand Avenue Temple, 205 E. Ninth St., which provides outreach programs for Kansas City's urban core by providing clothing, meals, a health clinic, a library and a women's shelter.

"Jesus saw Lazarus and said, 'Unbind him and set him free,' and we think of these as our marching orders," said Ron Brooks of the interfaith, interdenominational program.

"There are so many things that bind people: addictions, mental health issues or just bad habits. Those words, 'Unbind him and set him free,' we take up as our battle cry," he said. Brooks is pastor of Grand Avenue Temple United Methodist Church.

A biblical account of another Lazarus from the Gospel of Luke adds a social justice aspect to the church's mission.

"Lazarus was a poor man who sat by the rich man's table, waiting for crumbs from his table. And Luke says that he was sick, so sick that he had sores on his body, and dogs would come by and lick his sores," Brooks said.

"The rich man died and went to hell, and the poor man died and went to heaven. The rich man was thirsty and

cried out to Abraham, 'Please send someone down here with water,' and Abraham said, 'No, there's a chasm between us.'

"The rich man said, 'If you can't come help me, at least send Lazarus to my brothers' house because I have brothers who are still alive, and they are living the same way I lived, and I don't want them to end up where I am.'



At the Saturday lunch provided by Lazarus Ministries, John Elizalde recently grabbed a bite to eat. The ministries operate at the Grand Avenue Temple United Methodist Church, 205 E. Ninth St.

"We're also working with these rich people, for lack of a better term, the suburban churches and rural churches

who come down here with their volunteers. They have their eyes open about life down here, this culture, and they count their blessings," Brooks said.

Part of the eye-opening experience is a prayer walk that passes by city missions, a community kitchen on the Paseo and the Kansas City Central Library, a popular place for the poor to escape the summer heat and winter cold.

Brooks said the staff and volunteers at the church don't use "homeless" or "street people." Instead, they use "sojourner."

"It's inclusive," Brooks said. "We're all on a journey to the Promised Land."

Jessica Bryon is the director of Lazarus Ministries and its five outreach programs. The clothing boutique, open Saturdays from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., is well organized. Women's clothes are on the right side of the boutique and men's are on the left. Personal hygiene products are on a table.

The urban sojourners who come for a new set of clothes get help from a personal shopper. They appreciate the undivided attention.

"They are limited to what they can get, like an outfit," Bryon said. "Everything is used except underwear and socks, which we always buy new. Anything we don't use, we pass on to other organizations."

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Teresa Brown (left) got some help picking out clothes last month from volunteer Millie James at the Lazarus Ministries clothing boutique at Grand Avenue Temple. The boutique is open from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

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Clothes are sorted by season, gender and sizes, which requires a lot of volunteers. About 100 sojourners visit every Saturday, when a food line also is open from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. On Sundays, breakfast is served at 8 a.m. From noon to 3 p.m., the health clinic is open and another meal is available. Bryon explained how the Saturday and Sunday meals, known as the Lazarus Table, came about:

“The church congregation had brought potluck dinner for a meeting when a man walked in from the street and helped himself to a plate of food. The congregation was discussing closing when that happened. The congregation brought more food next time and more food the time after that.”

The Lazarus Table is only on Saturday and Sunday because a community kitchen at Eighth Street and the Paseo serves meals Monday through Friday. The menu often is determined by excess commodities at Harvesters. If it’s potatoes, then potatoes go on the menu. That can be a challenge for the chef, Bryon said.

“No one should be hungry in Kansas City,” Brooks said.

Bryon, who has a master’s degree in social work, partners with University of Missouri-Kansas City medical students on Sunday for the health clinic.

“They set up individual stalls and put up shower curtains to provide a semblance of privacy,” Bryon said.

A doctor is available, pharmacy students dispense a limited amount of medications, and services such as blood pressure monitoring and blood sugar testing are provided.

The women’s shelter is open Dec. 1 to April 1, when area shelters are likely to be at overflow capacity. Bryon said the shelter serves an average of 16 women an evening. “Volunteers bring in meals six nights a week, and the women are on their own one night a week,” Bryon said. Chores are assigned by lottery.

“We get older women who have health problems, and a number of them are on drugs or have a mental illness,”

Bryon said. “It cost about \$3,000 per month to run, but it’s the most challenging, most rewarding and most respectful experience.”

A hair salon staffed by volunteers during the shelter season helps boost women’s morale, and sojourners are grateful for the library, which is stocked with donated books, mostly paperbacks. The books are checked out on the honor system.

Volunteers and donations make it all work, including bagels from Panera Bread at Crown Center; help from 50 churches, three every weekend, with two on Saturday and one on Sunday, and the efforts of four women who live full time in Lazarus Ministries’ supportive housing. Even the volunteer coordinator is a volunteer.

Grand Avenue Temple, which dates back to 1865, also is a host site for Angel Food Ministries, a food box program for families and individuals. On a recent weekday, a few sojourners were in the drop-in center, the only air-conditioned room in the building. It’s open 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday to Friday, a place to rest awhile and maybe have a bite to eat.

That day, someone was playing the piano, accompanying a voice singing “Amazing Grace.”

For more information, go to grandavenuetempleumc.org. ■



LAZARUS MINISTRIES
• AT HISTORIC GRAND AVENUE TEMPLE •

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