

The Inner City Ministry

“It works.” Denny and Pam Follis have been working with Inner City Ministry for thirteen years, and that is the reason why. “It’s a program that works. We see kids, twelve or thirteen years old, that we picked up when they were three to six. They’re riding other buses now, helping out.”

Every Monday night that Metro schools are in session, a bus brings twenty-five or so children, three to six years old, to Donelson Church of Christ for about an hour. “It’s hectic while they’re there,” Robin Collier said. “It’s almost like an hour-long VBS.”

Denny Follis and Steve Taylor alternate driving the bus, owned by Inner City Ministry, which requires a Class B Commercial Drivers License. John Sanders rides with them each week, usually with a child on his lap. “It’s a good ministry,” he said. “More people should be involved.” Denny Follis agreed: “It doesn’t take a lot of time. I’m usually home by nine.” Riders on the bus “sit with a child, talk to one or two, and keep them in their seats. They’re only three to six. You just need to show them you love them.”

Drivers leave the Inner City parking lot about six-thirty and drive through J. C. Napier Homes. Information and invitations are distributed through schools that serve the area. This year, an average of about twenty-five children wait for the bus each week, but the numbers vary. “We’ve probably had as few as ten,” John Sanders said. “When the weather’s bad,” Denny added. There have been over forty. In past years, the weekly average was nearer fifty. Steve Taylor feels the difference is because fewer families are living in Napier Homes.

Arriving at Donelson by seven, the children hear a Bible lesson presented by John Collier or see a film. Robin organizes the lessons and supplies, and Clint Whitefield has been a teaching assistant since the program began. They begin in the fall with Adam and Eve and move through the Bible with stories and activities highlighting God’s plan. After the lesson or film, the children are divided into smaller groups for a simple craft or activity. “Sometimes it’s as simple as coloring,” Robin said. “All we’re trying to do is plant the seed. We’re just trying to give them a safe place to come, hear about Jesus, have a snack, play in a loving environment.”

The children may not be clean and dressed in Sunday best. “They’re going to come as they are,” Robin said, “and that’s how we should accept them.”

Classes are followed by pizza, bought at a generous discount from Fletcher’s, with cookies and drinks. Although Donelson’s elders have made money available, little from the church budget has been required. Rachel Bevans coordinates the cookies and drinks, and several Donelson members, including Barbara Hazelip, contribute to the cost of snacks.

“For some of these children,” Denny said, “that’s supper. That’s all they get.” He tells of one little girl who got on the bus for the ride home with her peanut butter and jelly sandwich stuffed in her pocket. “She was taking it home to eat.”

By eight, the children are boarding the bus to return home. Steve Taylor, in his eighth year driving, tells of a little girl who told John Sanders that she lived in a

dumpster. John lightened the situation by recalling Oscar the Grouch who lives in a trash can on Sesame Street. The little girl laughed and was known from then on as Oscar. “The responsibility,” Steve said, can be “unnerving, especially when it’s cold and dark. Three-year-olds aren’t always sure where they’re supposed to get off,” and parents aren’t always waiting. “You wish they had a different environment with two parents who love each other and are responsible and concerned about their education, being loved, respected and cherished. Some won’t live to be adults. But if we’re able to help some of them,” Steve feels his Monday nights are well spent. “They just need love. These are just kids crying out for attention. Yeah, sometimes they’re unruly, but they just need love.”

Donelson’s involvement with Nashville’s Inner City Ministry began about fourteen years ago with Katherine Smith heading the teaching part of the ministry. Jeff Smedley or an Inner City staff driver drove the bus, and John Collier rode. Denny began driving the next year, and Pam began helping as well. Tom Burns has also been a driver. Linda Hall later headed teaching until Robin Collier assumed that role. Frank and Ginger Batson were also very involved for several years. Several teenagers have helped, including Carter Thomas, Amethyst Cheatham, Keaton and Karleigh Smedley, and, more recently, Susan Guinn, Jonathan Rochelle, Bethany Henegar and Sarah Moran. Joan Hodges often rides the bus.

Several of the people involved mentioned James Osborn, at fifteen one of the ministry’s success stories. James had participated in Inner City Ministry classes as a small child, then “started riding with us as a ten year old,” Denny said. Steve and Julie Taylor took him to Donelson’s youth camp for a couple of years. Denny said, “We went to listen to him preach one Sunday at Inner City Church. Now he’s down there working with Inner City most every night. He’s been in their leadership programs, and he’s grown into a strong leader.”

What does the ministry need? “People. It’s not really a lot of work,” Denny said, but extra hands and laps make an enormous difference. No special skills are needed, just reinforcements. This year, letters were sent to home churches asking for help on certain dates, but participation is spotty. “People tell us to call if you need somebody, but sometimes we don’t know until Monday afternoon. We’d like people who want to participate” to ride the bus or help with crafts or snacks. “We need men,” Robin said. Many of the children “don’t have men in their lives, so men are important. If you’ve got a lap and you love God and you like kids, you’re qualified.” And helping out won’t commit helpers forever. “Just because someone comes one Monday night doesn’t mean they have to come the rest of their lives.” The current participants’ experience, though, suggests that you might want to. Robin said, “One of the things that hooked me when I was getting tired was when we had the children’s pictures made with Santa. When I handed [a little boy] that photo, you’d have thought I’d handed him the moon. I saw pure amazement, pure joy.”

Denny (758-7288, dennyhandy@tds.net) welcomes help for any Monday night, for a certain week of each month or for a month at a time. “We can always use help. Come to see what goes on.” He also asks that Donelson members pray for the ministry and for the children, whose lives are often difficult.

Inner City Ministry itself always needs funding for diesel fuel and bus maintenance.

The reward is the blessing of getting to know the children. John Sanders said, “The little girl who peed on my lap her first year sat with me every week last year.” Steve agreed. “The neatest thing is being able to work with some of the kids individually. Some of kids you just fall in love with.” For Denny, the motivation is simple: “It works.”

[Our thanks to Peggy Peden for this report.]

Go to www.innercityministry.org for the Nashville Inner City Ministry web site.