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## Stories of hope for families

In the face of rising poverty, one way churches can have a strategic impact on their communities is by strengthening and supporting families. As financial stress is a main contributor to family instability and marital dissolution,<sup>1</sup> addressing the practical needs of families in crisis reinforces relational bonds and contributes to the healthy development of children. Ministries become even more meaningful when churches go beyond aid to offer friendship – when a struggling family makes a lasting connection with someone with a personal interest in helping them reach for “a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). These three examples of church-based family ministries come from the “stories of hope” in *The Salt & Light Guidebook*, a resource manual for Christians in the Knoxville, TN, area who take seriously the mandate to “seek the welfare of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7).<sup>2</sup>

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Excerpted from the *Salt & Light Guidebook* (forthcoming 2009) with permission from the Compassion Coalition.

Above photo of Family Promise of Knoxville.

### FAMILY PROMISE:

#### HOSPITALITY FOR THE HOMELESS

#### Amy Davis

Homeless shelters typically conjure up images of institutional-sized rooms, rows of cots, and cafeteria-style meals. Knoxville has a few of these places, and hundreds of men, women, and children gratefully receive their services every night. But Family Promise of Knoxville ([www.familypromiseknoxville.org](http://www.familypromiseknoxville.org)) is thinking in smaller numbers. It purposefully keeps its case load low – only four families – so that they can offer guests the personal attention they so critically need.

Family Promise is part of the national Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) model, which organizes church-based temporary housing, meals, and assistance for homeless individuals and families. The Knoxville network of 12 host congregations and 17 supporting congregations shares

the responsibility for caring for the families and providing volunteers, as well as managing meals and shelter.

What makes Family Promise uniquely effective is that it brings together a circle of existing church resources to do what individual churches or volunteers alone could not do. Some churches in the network set up temporary bedrooms in their building; others bring food; others supply people to stay overnight with the residents. Executive Director Joyce Shoudy says, "Everyone, anyone, can do just one little piece."

A key to the program's success is how volunteers serve as the welcoming front door for the families, who typically stay in the network for up to three months as they save up for more permanent housing. Joyce helps families prioritize their most pressing needs—employment, housing, day care, health services—and walks with them on the path to self-sufficiency.

But overcoming homelessness is not just about finding a place to live. Often it is also about overcoming the personal challenges of low self-esteem and lack of hope. Volunteers not only provide tangible assistance; they offer a listening ear, cheer leading, and prayer. They encourage and guide participants through the maze-like world of social services.

One notable success is Family Promise's own van driver, Mike, who graduated from the program in November 2006. Once a long distance trucker, he's now a single dad raising his 18-year-old daughter, Kylie. Kylie has been disabled since a stroke at age 3, and she cannot be left alone because of recurrent seizures. But despite these difficulties, this family of two is giving back. Mike drives the van each morning, picking up guests at the host facility and taking them to the day center, and Kylie is his copilot. Because both Mike and Kylie have "been there," they can serve as mentors, advocates, and guides for the families who ride along with them daily.

"We must think in terms of impact on a community, not raw numbers," says Shoudy. Through Family Promise, many different congregations are working together to make a deep impact. The lives they touch may be only a drop in Knoxville's homeless population, but they are forever changed.

HEALING HEARTS: A NEW CHURCH

FAMILY, A NEW FUTURE

Robert Finley

Ulana and her little son share an apartment in Knoxville. She has a good job and money in the bank, and her main goal is providing a better life for her son. Her future might not look so hopeful, had it not been for Healing Hearts.

Originally from the Seattle area, Ulana became homeless when she moved east to Pennsylvania. "A family at a church there took me in. I wasn't married, and when I got pregnant, my church shunned me."

A man at a different church put Ulana in touch with Veta Sprinkle, member of Farragut Church of Christ in Knoxville. Veta told her, "We've got a ministry called Healing Hearts. The ministry has an apartment, and you can come stay there." So Ulana got on a bus to Knoxville. Toni Garland met Ulana at the bus station – Ulana's introduc-

tion to what would become her new family.

When Ulana's son Aaron was born, Toni Garland was her doula. "This church opened its heart to us," Ulana reflects. "They helped with the baby, rocked him to sleep. They helped us to get furniture, diapers, and wipes. They want to see single moms succeed."

At first, Ulana shared the three-bedroom apartment with other single moms, who became close friends. People in Ulana's church family helped her find a job in sales and customer service, paying much better than minimum wage. Ulana opened a savings account for the first time. The church also helped her and Aaron get

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into an income-based subsidized apartment, meaning Ulana's rent will not rise above a certain percentage of her income. They helped her find low-cost health insurance and access to government services.

This support allows Ulana to focus on being a good mom. "It's hard being a single parent, but you can't give up. It's about Aaron, about being a family. He motivates me to get up out of bed and go to work. I want to be a positive influence on him. I want him to see me keep going, not quitting on him."



At The Well, a program for single mothers.

Toni has become a second mom to Ulana, godmother to Aaron. If you look for Ulana and Aaron on Christmas and Thanksgiving, you'll find them at Toni's. "My church is welcoming, with constant support, constant prayer. It became home very quickly. This family, this church, has molded my life."

MINISTERING TO THE  
WOMAN AT THE WELL  
Nancy Wahler

The police left the hospital room. Kim Jagers choked back tears while watching her youngest son's chest rise and fall. He'd been struggling to survive since his premature birth a year ago, and now his father was gone. Someone brought her other son to her. Her mind was fuzzy from a sedative when he looked into her eyes and asked, "Where's Daddy?"

The world seemed to stop. How could she explain suicide to a three-year-old?

She told him simply, "Daddy is dead."

Pulling his little body to her as he sobbed,

she prayed and ached for the strong arms that were supposed to wrap around her. Instead, God used her church, First Baptist Concord in Knoxville, to wrap them in love. Diapers appeared on her doorstep, clothing was donated, cards with just the right scripture arrived when she needed them. The church even finished her half-built home.

Through the turbulence of tragedy, Kim found an anchor in the Goid who is "a father to the fatherless" (Psalm 68:5). But for many single mothers Jesus' love is a message that gets

lost in piles of laundry and mounting debts. It's hard to conceptualize a loving heavenly father when all the men in your life have abused and abandoned you. Kim eventually remarried and regained stability, but she felt the call to use her experiences to serve others with similar stories of pain and loneliness. She launched an outreach to single moms at her church called The Well ([www.fbconcord.org/thewell](http://www.fbconcord.org/thewell)).

On Friday nights once a month, a diverse group of single mothers gathers for a meal, fellowship, and spiritual nourishment. While volunteers lead the children in an activity, Kim leads the women in Bible study and discussion. "The Well is important to me because everyone in that room understands what I go through on a daily basis of trying to be both mother and father to my daughter," affirms one participant. "If I am struggling with something, chances are someone has already gone through the same thing."

Kim helps women discover how Scripture serves as a practical guide to life. The focus is not on what has gone wrong before, but on how

single moms can daily put God at the center of their household and receive strength and encouragement to overcome personal challenges.

The Well also offers financial and personal counseling as well as car care. Regardless of whether they are church attenders, participants have a church safety net when they need it.

One participant describes how coming to The Well “refreshes her spirit,” true to its metaphorical name. “Before coming to The Well,” says another mom, “my heart had been ripped out and stomped on. Now I know, no matter what, God is with us.”

#### ENDNOTES

1. Virginia Rutter, *Economic Woes = Family Stress*, Council on Contemporary Families Briefing Paper (2008), [www.contemporaryfamilies.org](http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org).
2. *The Salt & Light Guidebook* (forthcoming 2009), edited by Andy Rittenhouse, Heidi Unruh and Travis Vaughn, is produced by the Compassion Coalition of Knoxville, TN ([www.compassioncoalition.org](http://www.compassioncoalition.org)).

## Food for the Journey: a resource for your church

Biblical reference:

Isaiah 58:1, 6-7

Personal application:

It was my junior year of high school.

We were on our big class trip to Washington, DC, to tour museums and visit important historic sites. One stop was at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. It was a cold morning, and we had waited for hours to enter the museum, but that cold was nothing compared to the chills I experienced in seeing the true horror of the Holocaust.

There are so many images and words from that day that are imprinted on my heart, such as these words from Pastor Martin Niemöller:

First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

Although I did not know yet about “advocacy,” this is when I first realized the importance of speaking up for others. Pastor Niemöller’s words helped me see that sometimes another person or group of people need someone to stand up and fight

for them. It’s easy to say to myself, “It’s none of my business,” but the truth is that it sometimes takes a person from outside the situation to raise awareness. It takes someone outside the situation to speak up for those who are suffering because their voices are being ignored.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to speak and act with wisdom, to be a voice for those whose voice is not heard, to stand up for those who are oppressed, to defend the rights of the poor and the hurting. Help us to be open-handed rather than tight-fisted and to embrace those around us with the same love with which you welcome us.

(Adapted from Proverbs 31:8-9, 20)

— by Sam Oakley, MSW 2007/MDiv 2008, associate director for the Center for Family and Community Ministries

**Food for the Journey is one of several free resources available in the Walking Alongside curriculum prepared by the Center for Family and Community Ministries. Find more at: [www.baylor.edu/cfcm](http://www.baylor.edu/cfcm)**