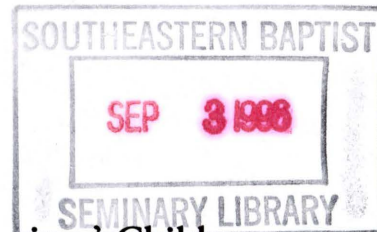


Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

Post Office Box 1889 · Wake Forest, NC · 27588-1889

Office of News & Information
Phone (919) 556-3101, ext. 271
Fax (919) 556-0998
CompuServe 71173,2451
Greg Kingry, Director of Public Relations
Dwayne Hastings, Editor-News & Information



Toy Chest Makes For A Merrier Christmas For Seminarians' Children

RALEIGH, N.C.--The scene had all the trappings of Christmas morning at dawn -- an evergreen bedecked with shimmering lights and glistening ornaments, well-dressed dolls and cuddly stuffed animals waiting for a hug, big bikes and little bikes at the ready for pint-sized pilots, and enough toys and games to keep a youngster amused at least until noon. And the adults, while eagerly anticipating the morning ahead, stood silently for a moment, thankful for God's provisions.

But Christmas Day was more than a month away and this scene was not some family's living room, and the shouts of glee were not from children but from grateful Moms and Dads entering the family life center at Bay Leaf Baptist Church Nov. 18.

Christmas was made a little brighter for 300 children as their parents -- all students at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary -- crowded into the Raleigh, N.C., church's family life center for the church's second annual Toy Chest.

Dennis Bell commutes two and a half hours each way from just outside of Winston-Salem, N.C., to attend college classes at Southeastern. Bell makes the trek back home from the Wake Forest, N.C., school each weekend to be with his family and serve as pastor of Huntsville Baptist Church in Hamptonville, N.C.

Yet this Saturday, his wife, Yolanda, was standing by herself in the crowded family life center at Bay Leaf -- dabbing at her eyes moist with tears -- overcome with the kindheartedness of strangers.

"As a pastor's wife, it's overwhelming to see how this church has taken on this ministry," Bell said, surveying the tables stacked with new toys, games and books.

"There's no way I could tell them how special this is to me as a student's wife; it's just a blessing to see it," whispered the mother of two, her voice breaking with emotion.

It was hard to know who was the most excited Saturday morning -- the members of Bay Leaf who were assisting or the parents who found the sight more than a little overwhelming.

"I'm really at a loss for words as to how I feel. I just thank the Lord for this church and the way they're reaching out to the seminary family," said Mike Hamby, a student in Southeastern's bachelor of arts program and the father of a 6-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son.

"It's a powerful testimony to us. It just blesses my heart," Hamby said.

God planted the idea in Bay Leaf member Barbara Hardee's mind several years ago: "We thought it would be a tremendous way to minister to the seminary community as they prepare to go and out and minister to others."

The women's groups at the church coordinated the effort -- promoting the need for toys or cash among the congregation, making numerous trips to make the purchases, and finally, being there to enjoy the moment as the eager parents rushed into the large hall.

"Everything was done very prayerfully," Hardee said. "Even before we'd go out shopping, we would stop and pray that God would direct us."

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DECEMBER 22, 1995

Cash donations to the program from Bay Leaf members alone topped \$12,000. Members of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church in Raleigh pitched into the project by also donating toys.

It's just our way of being supportive and caring, Hardee added. "Its important we help them during these tough times while they're in school."

Cindy Dean, whose husband Joe is a second year student in the seminary's master of divinity degree program, admitted that without Bay Leaf's generosity, Christmas gifts for their children would be difficult to come by.

"It helps us out so much. We are financially strapped right now and I know a lot of the other families are, too. It'll be a great Christmas because of this, believe me."

All the gifts were priced: none higher than \$7.00 and all far below their original cost. A drawing at the close of the morning allowed many of the parents to purchase larger gifts -- including 20 shiny new bicycles -- for only \$10.00. All the money collected, nearly \$2,800, will go to the Foreign Mission Board's Lottie Moon offering for foreign missions.

"It's our hope that this will lighten the burden on the parents," Hardee said, noting it was just one of many outreach ministries to the community the women's groups oversees. That same day, over 450 persons visited the church's clothes closet.

Dave Mason, who is enrolled in Southeastern's associate of divinity degree program, said he was awestruck by the magnitude of the Toy Chest effort. "Standing outside this morning, before the doors opened, I was amazed to consider all the work that has gone into this. It's astounding that so many people are thinking about others," Mason said.

Having left an established career to attend seminary, Mason said he was no longer financially stable: "You really don't know how you're going to handle things like Christmas. This Toy Chest has made it possible."

--30--

By Dwayne Hastings

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DECEMBER 22, 1995