

‘This is all about serving them’

A monthly service at Durham Freeway Bridge gives residents friendship and faith.

By Catherine O’Neill & Nicole Caporaso
The Durham VOICE

As semi-trucks rumble noisily overhead, a sizable crowd gathers for food, faith and fellowship under the Durham Freeway Bridge.

Even on snowy winter days and humid summers, you can find Pastor David Smith and his wife Cheryl beneath the bridge on the third Saturday of every month. As drivers honk their horns and pump their brakes, passers-by can hear the sounds of musicians leading praise and worship.

The service, called Meet Me at the Bridge, was created with the idea of “taking God’s love to the inner city,” according to the organization’s website. Designed to serve those who live on the streets of Durham, the Saturday service includes music, clothing donations, a spiritual reflection led by Smith and a full meal for all in attendance.

Smith, who has been a pastor for more than 30 years, began this ministry in 2010. He said the streets are his church, and those who live there are his congregation.

“I started establishing relationships with (residents), and I couldn’t stay away,” Smith said. “So day after day, I just kept meeting more and more guys, praying with them, getting to know them, letting them get to know me.”

What began as a weekly bible study and meal with a small group of people has grown over time. Six weeks after beginning his ministry in Durham, Smith expanded the program to include monthly meetings under the bridge for the community.

Now the ministry attracts people from across the city. In addition to public transportation, the ministry sends a bus to downtown Durham to help pick up community members for the bridge service each month, Smith said.

“The hardest part is seeing all the suffering and poverty and pain without becoming so absorbed in having sympathy and human compassion that I lose my joy,” Smith said.

With the help of two other volunteers, Renee Newman — who attended Smith’s previous church in Hillsborough — has been helping run the meal service at monthly events for the past seven years.



Meet Me at the Bridge sends a bus to pick up community members, like Detrique Stone, to the service each month. Photo by Catherine O’Neill.

“It’s always been the desire of our hearts,” she said. “All three of us have a passion for this.”

Newman said multiple local churches and a high school volunteer to help coordinate the food service and clothing donations.

“I run a food bank in Hillsborough for my church, and so whatever we get an overflow of, I always put it to the side for the bridge,” she said.

Jeannie MacAdams, a volunteer who has been involved in the ministry since its inception, knows what it’s like to struggle to make ends meet.

“I’ve said for years this is my real church,” MacAdams said. “I was a single mom, barely making it years ago. There’s no reason for anybody to feel they should stay away. They’re always welcome.”

MacAdams said the service has grown a lot over the years.

Many community members, like Joseph Kenion, return to the bridge month after month. Kenion moved to Durham when he was 8 years old and began attending the service around January.

He said he believes that Smith’s ministry is important because the people who are truly lost are often on the streets, not in the

congregation of churches.

“They’re coming out in the public while most churches are staying in,” Kenion said. “This is the byways and highways that Jesus wants people to come out to.”

He also said that it’s not about the food or the clothes — it’s about the spirit of Christ.

Others have just discovered the ministry, but said they plan to return.

Ikeyia Burton lives just down the street from the bridge with her two children. She said Saturday was her second time experiencing Smith’s ministry.

“People get together and gather and realize the importance of fellowship and friendship,” she said. “The difference in people is really nothing, and I think it shows a lot of unity.”

Wendy Major is one of the singers who often leads the group in worship. She said it’s important to remember the purpose of the event is not to change those who attend.

“This is all about serving them because we’re in their house,” she said. “And we receive them just the way they are.”

Smith said the ministry is always looking for volunteers. Its website, www.meetmeatthebridge.com, has more information about ways to help and the organization’s mission.