



Reaching Out

Nathaniel Mission Ministers to Its Neighbors

By Robin Roenker | Photos by Matt Goins

In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, roofer Kenneth Emery of Lexington moved there to help residents rebuild their homes. He eventually ended up in Florida, repairing roofs damaged in that state by lesser storms. But in 2006, when he suffered a debilitating stroke that left him partially paralyzed, the help he gave wasn't reciprocated.

"I couldn't get no help in Florida," said Emery, now 50. "There was no place there for someone like me with no money and no medical insurance."

Emery finally got the medical attention he needed by coming home to Lexington, to the neighborhood where he grew up, and knocking at the door of the Nathaniel Mission Health Clinic.

Since 1979 the clinic has served the

medical needs of nearby residents of Davis Bottom and Irishtown — two of Lexington's poorest downtown neighborhoods. The clinic provided Emery with free medical exams and weekly physical therapy.

After 15 months of therapy, he can move his arms again and can walk with the help of a cane.

"They are wonderful people there," Emery said of the mission. "If I won the

Nathaniel Mission, on DeRoode Street, welcomes neighbors.



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lottery, I'd give half my money to them. There should be more people in the world like that, who take people in who don't have anything."

Ministering to All Needs

The Nathaniel Mission Health Clinic is just one component of the larger Nathaniel United Methodist Mission, which was first chartered as a mission of the Lexington District of the United Methodist Church in 1946. The agency has no formal written history, but neighbors' stories reveal it was begun even earlier, in the 1930s, by Asbury College students who on Sundays drove into the area, honking their car horns to call residents to a nearby hill for outdoor church services.

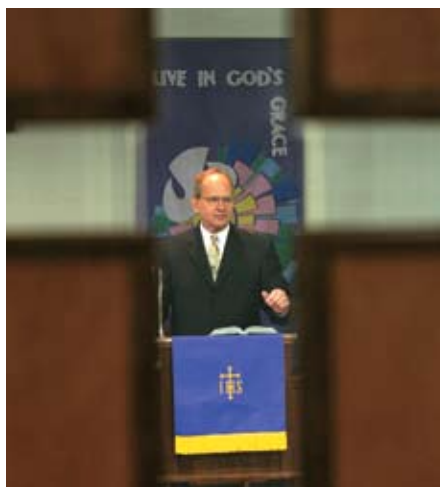
By 1950 the mission had built the first phase of its headquarters at 616 DeRoode St., where today it still operates, several building additions later.

There, the mission reaches out to an estimated 4,100 residents in its service area, which stretches from Red Mile, Leestown and Manchester roads to Maxwell and Limestone, beyond the immediate neighborhoods of Davis Bottom and Irishtown (first settled by former slaves and Irish immigrants and later largely by families migrating from Appalachia), to include other economically challenged downtown areas such as Speigel Heights, Pralltown, and Thompson Addition.

Within the solid beige walls of the unassuming yet inviting cinderblock structure, residents can find a "free room" where clothing, food, and household supplies are available; they can attend services at Nathaniel United Methodist Church, chartered in 1995 and enjoy free breakfasts each Sunday morning; they can receive back-to-school clothes and supplies and take advantage of special summer day programs for kids; they can have their pets treated and vaccinated at the visiting vet clinic for virtually no cost;



Top, nurse Robin Lewis and Dr. Baxter Napier both volunteer at the Nathaniel Mission's medical clinic. Below, Rev. David MacFarland preaches at a service.



and, in the mission's new medical clinic addition, completed in 2007, uninsured adults who live in the mission's service area can obtain health checkups, many prescriptions, eye exams, dental exams, mental health counseling, and even preventative care free of charge.

In 2007 the mission health clinic treated 1,399 adults with donated services from a rotating team of 10 volunteer physicians and 12 nurses. The dental clinic will treat more than 400 patients this year, and the eye clinic will treat nearly 100, also both through the donated services of area practitioners, said Rev. David MacFarland, the church's senior pastor and the mission director.

"There are plenty of folks that could run a health clinic with more resources

than we do," MacFarland admits. But he said it's the mission's God-centered focus that sets their work apart. "That's what makes us distinctive," he said. "We want to be the presence of God in the world."

The primary health problems seen at the clinic include obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and poor vision and dental care, "the types of things people put off when money is low," said Mary Jo Billitter, a retired nurse who volunteers weekly at the clinic.

This year marks the beginning of the clinic's shift to emphasizing more preventative health programming, including new monthly diabetes classes, which offer instruction on healthy eating and weight control; free glucometers, test strips, and other medical supplies; and even bags of healthy foods from the mission's own food pantry or coupons to receive food from the God's Pantry distribution center housed at the mission.

More than just providing health care, the clinic also becomes a place where residents trust they can talk freely about their struggles — medical or otherwise, said Sarah Moore, volunteer interim coordinator of the health clinic.

"When you are poor and don't get some of your basic needs met, you are very careful about who you share those details of your family situation with. Many of our patients do not trust other people easily. But they trust our nurses, and our nurses are trained to get to know our patients and really find out what's going on in their lives. Many patients have no one else to listen to them, so part of our mission is developing that trust."

A New Beginning

Currently, its only full-time staff person, MacFarland, who came to the Nathaniel Mission last September and was installed as director in February, is helping the mission's neighbors navigate through tremendous change.

NATHANIEL MISSION



Joanne and Lewis Ricketts participate in a walk to benefit the mission.



When Newtown Pike is extended 1.5 miles from Main Street to Broadway and Limestone over the next five years, the 25 acres of Davis Bottom where Nathaniel Mission sits will literally be rebuilt: Homes will be razed, the land filled with three to 10 feet of dirt, and the neighborhood completely re-envisioned, MacFarland said.

The 40 or so families who now live on

that parcel of land were faced with the choice of moving out or staying on as part of a community land trust. The 18 families who opted to stay are in the process of moving into a modular home park across the street from the mission, where they will live for

two to three years while their new, affordable homes are built.

Recently, those families got a tour of their new modular homes for the first time.

"They were literally jumping up and down with joy to have a 1,000-square-foot modular home with three bedrooms and two baths, a washer and dryer in

the back, and a brand new stove and microwave," said Ann Ross, president of the Nathaniel Missionary Society Board, which oversees the work of the mission.

"The folks who live down there are low, low income, and they have very little. But they have the same hopes and desires and wishes for their children as anyone else," said Ross, a former vice mayor of Lexington. "It's just such a joy seeing this area that has been for decades neglected and rejected get a chance at a new beginning."

To help the families settle into their new homes, the Nathaniel Mission's New Start New Life Program will provide them with new couches, beds, and bedding, along with dishes, kitchenware, linens, and towels. Funding for the program, like most of the mission's outreach, comes

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primarily from donations of individuals, churches, institutions, and foundations, such as the Keeneland Foundation and the Good Samaritan Foundation.

Through the upheaval of all the moves, MacFarland will continue the mission's commitment to house-to-house visitation, providing pastoral care and outreach to residents.

Eventually, in one of the last stages of the road expansion project, even the mission building itself will be razed. MacFarland projects that by 2013 the mission will be operating out of a completely new, state-of-the-art facility directly across the street from where it sits now.

Already, though, a spirit of change is taking hold at the mission, MacFarland said.

More and more, the mission's goals involve finding ways to engage residents in charting their own success.

"We no longer want to fix things for people. We want to develop people to solve their own problems. Would-be volunteers call and say, 'I want to come down and do stuff for you.' We say, 'We don't want you to come do stuff for us; we want you to do stuff with us,'" MacFarland explains. "When things are always done for you, two things happen: No. one, you think you're entitled to it, but worse than that, you think you can't do it yourself."

MacFarland points to the mission's new, widely popular low-cost ceramics classes as one exciting way it's working to provide unique fellowship opportunities and novel skills sets to its clients.

Last fall a local ceramics hobbyist unexpectedly donated his complete ceramics studio to the mission — including a kiln and more than 340 professional-grade molds — and the mission has made the most of its windfall.

The classes, which meet three times weekly, regularly see 35 in attendance and have become a place "where people are comfortable opening up and talking about their problems and concerns while they work on their pottery," said Ann Drury, a Nathaniel United Methodist Church member who teaches the classes along with area resident Albert Presley. "It's brought people back to the mission who haven't been here for years."

MacFarland feels the classes have metaphoric value as well, teaching participants the value of staying one step ahead of whatever life may throw at them.

"A life of poverty is always based on reacting. You can never plan. You always react. That's the prime characteristic of poverty," he said. "But ceramics doesn't work that way. You have to plan; you have to anticipate if you want the project to turn out well."

No matter what changes the new era of Nathaniel Mission's ministry brings, MacFarland is sure of one thing: Its focus will remain religion-based, founded on service.

"Everything we do has to be Christ-centered somehow," he said. "God's word going out into the world, in intentional outreach to the neighborhoods we serve, that's our mission." 🐾

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