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SPREADING GOD'S WEALTH

Katy church updates a biblical parable and turns cash into change — of a different kind

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Tony Housley, foreground, and Wesley Julin, second from left, join other homeless men from Houston's Open Door Mission of The Fellowship at Cinco Ranch in Katy.

As the long white limo slowly pulled away from the Open Door Mission, seven formerly homeless men settled back into the plush leather seats.

It was the beginning of a special night out, beginning with dinner at O'Rourke's Steakhouse and a Houston Aeros game.

From his seat in front, Andy Valadez listened as the men laughed a little and talked a lot about God's blessings in their lives — blessings that had brought them to this moment.

They didn't yet know that Valadez had arranged the evening as part of an assignment from The Fellowship at Cinco Ranch, a Southern Baptist church in Katy.

"I'm excited about this fellowship with my fellow Christians, without using alcohol or drugs," Tommy White said.

The men smiled and pointed to a tray holding empty crystal carafes meant for liquor. Tonight the drink of choice would be soda, and that was just fine with them.

"If you're drunk, you forget any fun you had," William Adams said. "God is showing me he will take me places as long as I'm following him."

Only one of the men had ridden in a limousine before, but all agreed it was a grand way to see the town.

RESOURCES

KINGDOM ASSIGNMENTS

- Denny Bellesi, former pastor of Coast Hills Community Church in Aliso Viejo, Calif., took his inspiration for \$100 "Kingdom Assignments" from the "Parable of the Talents" in Matthew 25:14-30.

- Churches around the country, including The Fellowship at Cinco Ranch in Katy, adopted the idea. See their stories at www.thefellowship.org.

- Bellesi and his wife wrote about the experience in *The Kingdom Assignment* (Zondervan; \$12.99).

More stories can be read at www.kingdomassignment.com

"Can we pray? " someone quietly asked.

"How about a traveling prayer?" suggested Terry Palmer, who asked God to protect the vehicle they were riding in and gave thanks for the evening.

Several of the men were curious about how and why the night out was arranged.



Pastor Jerry Edmonson introduced himself and explained: "I'm Andy's pastor, and we did a project at our church called a 'Kingdom Assignment.' We asked: 'Are you willing to take something on that will change your life?' "

Fifty-five adults responded to Edmonson's question at several services in early November. When they came to the front of the church, he handed each astonished person a crisp \$100 bill.

At separate services, 20 junior and senior high school students each received \$50 and 12 children got \$25 for their individual projects.

There were three rules, he said:

"This is not your money, it belongs to God. You have to go out and bless other people — expand the Kingdom of God one heart, one life at a time. And you have to come back and share what you did."

"Amen," the men replied.

"Tonight is for everybody in this car to know they matter to God," Edmonson said in conclusion.

Edmonson was inspired to try the project after reading *The Kingdom Assignment* by Denny and Leesa Bellesi, describing a similar effort at his Southern California church.

When Edmonson distributed the money to Fellowship volunteers, several later reported thinking: "What did I get myself into?"

Valadez recalls feeling stumped.

After sharing the story with family members, he got an additional \$200 and thought about sending his money to a young woman in Tennessee who had raised \$3,000 at her church to take a group of homeless men out to dinner in a limo.

He thought his assignment was done.

But Valadez, president of Marketing Dynamics, eventually realized his choice didn't really satisfy the assignment.

He decided to call some business contacts and try to replicate the project in Houston.

The Aeros donated tickets, co-owner Sam Hernandez of O'Rourke's (which recently closed temporarily) provided dinner, and Elite Limousines of Houston volunteered the ride.

In the limo, the men sat quietly for a moment and then shared some of their personal stories.

Palmer and White have graduated from the challenging nine-month drug and alcohol program run by the Open Door Mission, a Christ-centered emergency-relief and rehabilitation center for homeless, addicted and disabled men.

Others were at various stages and were selected for the night out as an encouragement or a reward.

"The Open Door Mission can change your life," said White, now studying to be a chef at Houston Community College. "When I went there, I had a blown leg, I'd lost my house, my job, my girlfriend. Now I have my health back, money in the bank, and (I'm) going to college. The Lord gave me double what I lost."

Palmer, a former makeup artist, came to the mission homeless and sick with HIV. "I came here to die," he said.

Now in good health, Palmer has visited his family in Georgia for the first time in 20 years and is a staffer at the mission, where he's known as "the Energizer Bunny."

"When I want to see a miracle, I just look in the window," Palmer said.

When church members reported back on their assignments, Edmonson found that many wanted to continue their work. Many also went beyond \$100.

"Lots of people helped families evacuated from New Orleans or gave them Christmas," he said. "Several women raised \$1,500 to help the foster children at a center in Katy.

"Another man is raising \$5,000 for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. One of the children bought little stuffed bears, put Scripture verses on them and handed them out at a hospital."

Ryan Ober and his wife pooled their money and distributed more than 40 bags with nonperishable food items to homeless people on the street.

"It made me feel good that I could do something, and people needed it," Ober said.

J.J. Bost, afternoon receptionist at The Fellowship, made what she calls "bundles of compassion."

She bought Christmas-theme fleece blankets and inside each one placed an inflatable pillow, a washcloth, socks and skin-care products. Her husband donated his \$100, and other friends chipped in.

Bost made 10 bundles at a cost of \$45 each. One went to a Katrina evacuee with five children; she had lost everything in the hurricane, then lost her new belongings in a hotel fire.

Valadez wanted the night out to be "like a band of brothers" experience. By the end of the evening, all agreed that it had been.

Samuel Barnes, who recently got out of prison, enjoyed his first steak in 25 years. After the lively hockey game, they got a tour on the ice.

Valadez still has the initial \$300 and hopes to use it for future projects with Barnes and the other men.

"It's great to be used by God, and I didn't realize how cool this would be," he said.

To the men at the mission, it was more than a Friday night out. It gave them hope for the future and a feeling that people cared.

"Andy and I were both Marines," said Adams, a Vietnam-era vet. "He gave me his own Marine lapel pin, and it's still on my suit. The night gave me a better outlook and made us feel that you can do anything."

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