

Small church with a big heart opens its facility to Family Promise

Shannon Carey January 12, 2018 [Fountain City](#)



The youth group at Church of the Good Shepherd left this note for children staying at the church through Family Promise. (Photos submitted)

People of faith are often called upon to give, and sometimes what they're giving is the very building where they celebrate that faith. Such is the work of [Family Promise](#) in Knoxville. Faith communities of all kinds open their worship center doors to house families in times of need.

[Church of the Good Shepherd](#), an Episcopalian church in Fountain City, is one of several faith communities hosting families one week per quarter, and while it's hard work and requires church organization to shuffle meeting times, it's been a rewarding experience for the church family.



A Sunday School room is transformed into a bedroom for Family Promise at Church of the Good Shepherd.

The church's Family Promise coordinator is volunteer Jennifer Bohlken. She's been part of the church family for 18 years and remembers the church's first host week in November 2010.

"When we very first started hosting, we were terrified that things would be stolen or vandalized. It was letting strangers into our home. But we also wanted to do the right thing, and we've never had anything stolen or vandalized," she said.

"We turn our church for one week at a time into a home for families with children who would not otherwise have a home. We utilize the building God gave us for the housing of these families. We provide shelter and the dinner meal, plus the stability of knowing where you're going to sleep for the next seven days."



Church of the Good Shepherd hosted Christmas for Family Promise with a tree for each family.

Family Promise provides an important service to families with children. The families are “situationally homeless,” meaning that it is a temporary situation due to some kind of emergency or loss, and the family just needs to get caught back up. If a single parent goes to a homeless shelter with children over age 12, the children of the opposite sex can’t stay with the parent in the shelter. Family Promise keeps the entire family together while they work to find housing.

At Church of the Good Shepherd, immediately following Sunday services of their host week, volunteers turn the fellowship hall and Sunday school rooms into a home for the week, setting out air mattresses, sheets, blankets, a couch and comfy chairs, a table for children’s board games, TV and DVD player. Families check in and out on Sundays. Two church volunteers stay overnight at the church while the family is there. The church provides dinner and a warm welcome, too.

“We do get to know them, and we love them,” said Bohlken. “I had no idea how many people I would bond with so well. There comes a point in the week where they’ve come out of their shell, and we truly have become friends. A lot of times they’ve had to leave everything behind.

They're people just like us, and most of us are one or two financial mishaps from being just like them."



A welcome message and photos of the congregation greet families hosted at Church of the Good Shepherd.

Three families have participated at the church after being hosted there for a week, and one family officially joined. One of the first families to be hosted at Church of the Good Shepherd returned to prepare dinner for another visiting family once they had found housing.

But the goal, Bohlken said, is not to garner more church members.

"It's not about us talking the talk that week. It's about walking the walk," she said. "They're all God's children, and we do what we can to love them and don't expect anything in return."

But the congregation does get something in return.

"It's one of the few ministries we do that involves everyone," said Bohlken. "Children come to play, older people help with laundry, and everything in between. It definitely brings us together as a family. At the end of a host week, we feel like we've gone on a mission trip together. It's a lot of work but very rewarding."

Being a host church has also helped Church of the Good Shepherd to strengthen their relationship with another church, [Central Baptist of Fountain City](#), with whom Good Shepherd is partnered for support. Central Baptist helps with food and other needed tasks.

“There aren’t many places or events where you see Episcopalians and Baptists hanging out together,” said Bohlken. “So often in churches we have an us and them mentality. This has been a fabulous opportunity to recognize that just because we don’t believe the same things doesn’t mean we can’t serve together. We adore our friends at Central Baptist.”