Red Bird Mission

RED BIRD MISSION IN KENTUCKY IS A CRITICAL SERVICE TO ITS CHANGING COMMUNITY. by RICHARD LORD

Poverty is multifaceted. It is all encompassing. It blocks the development and display of the gifts all people possess. It affects adults as well as children. Its consequences are physical, intellectual and emotional.

Red Bird Mission, a United Methodist Women-supported national mission institution in Beverly, Kentucky, works to ease rural poverty symptoms for people of all ages in its Appalachian community. It is the largest and most comprehensive United Methodist mission in the United States. It serves over 10,000 people annually.

The mission works to reduce suffering and give people new energy to develop long-term solutions that will allow them to overcome the financial poverty. It is a complete, thorough program that nourishes its beneficiaries and provides strength.

Adaptive community outreach

Located in a picturesque Appalachian valley on a two lane highway, Red Bird is well known in the area. Road signs pointing to its campus appear as far as 20 miles away. Its physical extension is
massive, including both medical and dental clinics, preschool as well as K-12 education, adult education, parenting classes, teen leadership training, workshops for home improvement projects, industrial kitchen and cafeteria, craft shop, computer lab and senior center. Through outreach programs, it provided over 33,000 meals in 2015, and residents raised an additional 30,000 pounds of produce. One hundred fifty-seven home improvement projects were completed in 2015.

For 95 years, Red Bird has offered its services to Bell, Leslie and Clay Counties. Today, the demand for its services is extremely acute. Forty-two percent of residents under the age of 18 live below the poverty level. Twenty-four percent of the population under 65 lives with disabilities.

Coal mining was a mainstay of the county’s economy. The mechanization of mines and environmental justice success have reduced jobs in the mines and related industries. In 2013 alone, mining jobs fell 19 percent.

Red Bird focuses on families. As the circumstances of families change, Red Bird moves with them, providing the
help they need. This is not limited to financial support. Red Bird provides parenting classes for parents struggling in their new roles. This has taken a new twist, often due to imprisonment for drugs. With few job options and stuck in a cycle of poverty, Appalachia can be a breeding ground for addiction.

Incarceration has led to grandparents raising their grandchildren while the parents serve their jail terms. Throughout the United States the number of grandparents raising grandkids continues to explode. Red Bird offers classes to help the grandparents adjust to their new responsibilities.

Mutual support
Families land on Red Bird’s door not only because their income has reduced. Sometimes, an increase in income can result in a reduction of lifestyle. Coupled with the fatalistic view of the cyclical nature of the coal industry; it results in many people remaining in the area, despite the decrease of jobs and not training in new fields. They are hoping that this is just another “down period.”

“They believe that life is set for them, that you follow the path set for you,” said Executive Director Kari Collins. “You do the best with what you’ve been given. They are very positive, strong people.”

Don (not his real name) is a restaurant manager. He was happy when he received a raise, which increased his take-home pay to $1,600 per month. He was not happy when he learned that this raise made them ineligible for many assistances that his family received.

“Even with his raise, it was very tight for us” related Lucy (not her real name), Don’s wife. “The help that we receive from Red Bird tops it off. Especially at the end of the month. Often I need milk. Red Bird helps. It relieves stress.”

Lucy lives in Leslie County, a 45 minutes drive from Red Bird. She rides with her mother to save gas.

“But, it’s worth the drive. For sure,” Lucy explained. “It helps a lot. They think of everything we need.”

Depending on a family’s circumstances, they might receive food for seven days every month. Or, it might be seven day supply every three months. That was the start of Red Bird’s assistance for Lucy and Don.

Lucy and Don have designated one room of their home as their daughter’s bedroom. But the floor was so rotten that no one could walk on it. The Red Bird work camp installed a new floor. Now, the girl has her own bedroom, and the parents reclaimed their own bed.

The water at Lucy and Don’s is not potable. Their well was contaminated due to coal mine runoff and lack of a sewage system. The water that they retrieve is usable only for washing clothes and bathing. It cannot be drunk.

So they buy drinking water. It costs $1.39 per gallon in a store. Red Bird supplies it for $0.05 per gallon. It is a very significant savings for people who live significantly below the poverty level. The USDA recommends that people drink a half gallon of water per day. For a family of four, that is two gallons per day, or 60 gallons per month. Using Red Bird water saves the family over $80 per month.

The line between staff and recipients in the Red Bird community blurs in some cases.

Candace Collins has worked at Red Bird for five years. She has performed many different jobs. Currently, she
works in home health care three days per week and in the preschool the other two days.

When Collins, 33, began working at Red Bird, she entered a web of services. It was not merely a job. Her children are 17 and 11. She is paid $10.10 per hour, which results in a take-home pay of $500.00 every two weeks. She receives food from the Red Bird pantry to help.

“I had it worse as a kid,” Collins said. “At times, I was hungry. It was very hard for my mom. She had five kids. But my two kids have never been hungry. “

And her family has a sponsor who donates for their support. They correspond monthly. Collins views the Georgia donor as a friend. They share their experiences and feelings, both the good and bad.

And her 17-year-old son is receiving vocational training to become a carpenter.

“Red Bird is very family oriented,” Collins said. “Not only in the programs they offer but as an employer as well. I can take off work to go to my kids’ school activities. They recognize that there are other things in life than just work.

“And there is the value to others of the work that you’re doing,” she continued. “Even if I were offered another job that paid more money, it would be very difficult for me to leave Red Bird. My ties to my clients are extremely close. I couldn’t break those ties.”

**Volunteer service**

Volunteers play a crucial role at Red Bird. Ever year, more than 2,500 come for short term assignments from 30 states. There are also 50 long-term volunteers who have moved to Red Bird to assume permanent roles. Some are year-round. Others come for a few months at a time, often repeating their service for many years.

Suzanne Pohli and her husband began volunteering in 1997. In 2008 they moved to Red Bird from their home in Wilmington, Delaware. During their tenure, they have experienced significant changes in the population.

“One of the patterns that we have seen is grandmothers caring for the kids,” Pohli said. “As long as they have custody, we serve them. In many families, it is the unemployed men who come for food. It is clear that they hate doing it, but it is their responsibility to provide food, regardless of where they get it.”

And there is attention paid to children’s long-term needs. Appropriate developmental guidelines are included in food and clothing bags. For example, a bag with clothes for a 6-month-old child contains developmental guidelines for a 6-month-old child.

“We’re here to help people get by,” Pohli said. “To help them to keep their heads above water. We do what we can, but no one can do it all.

When a family turns to us, they are in crisis,” she continued. “We first apply some Band-Aids. Like food and water. Inhabitable housing. At another level, our computer lab is used by people for online classes and to earn their GEDs. But, more importantly, we provide long-lasting programs. Like our school kids who are coming from families in crisis get the skills to lead to a more secure life.”

Red Bird’s class of 2016 had 17 students. Everyone went to college.

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