

**Annual State Fair Provides More than Fun and Games**

For 10 days every fall the South Carolina State Fair draws crowds seeking food, fun and entertainment along the Midway. Leading up to the fair hundreds of workers are busy around the clock setting up the rides and game stations. For two days ahead of the fair’s grand opening volunteers from Columbia Metro and Lexington Baptist Associations are also there working in the shadow of the famous Rocket, taking advantage of the opportunity for ministry.

On Monday morning, October 7th dozens of volunteers from Riverland Hills Baptist Church and Kittiwake Baptist Church worked to assemble more than 600 bags with sandwiches, bananas and homemade sweets that were given to fair workers at lunchtime that day. Other volunteers greeted workers who stopped in for coffee and snacks, while members of the Baptist Nursing Fellowship offered free blood pressure checks nearby. Additional groups arrived in the afternoon to prepare supper, followed by more volunteers the next day who prepared two more meals to distribute. Word about the complimentary food travels fast among workers, many of whom remember the kindness of this ministry from previous years.

“This is an international mission field, as many of these workers are from other countries. These people work seven days a week and, for many, this is the only church they see. They remember us each year so it may actually be the only church they see each year,” says Cathy Locklear, impacting communities ministry mobilizer with Columbia Metro, who estimates the pre-fair ministry serves around 2,150 total meals.

Pastor Tim Sieberhagen of Kittiwake Baptist says his church has been participating in the state fair ministry for 10 years. As he interacts with workers or hands out bagged lunches, he shares the gospel and offers to pray with them. He says many of the workers he meets are in desperate situations, feel lost and are worn out from 12-hour workdays performed in tough conditions.

“We offer food, snacks and conversation. Folks are willing to engage with us. I am originally from South Africa and many of the workers at the fair are also South African. Connecting with them and being there for them to talk with someone ‘from home’ is a blessing. I also love seeing Baptists coming together to minister in the name of Jesus,” Sieberhagen says.

Phyllis Gibson helped assemble turkey sandwiches for the bagged lunches, something her group from Riverland Hills Baptist has been doing for a decade. The Women on Mission at her church also provides homemade sweets for the lunches.

“Workers are always receptive and tell us we are the only state that shows compassion to them like this. They always look forward to coming to South Carolina,” Gibson says.

Kittiwake Church member Dwayne West and his wife Kathy have been serving with the state fair ministry for six and eight years, respectively. Dwayne is recognized with hand waves and smiles as he drives a golf cart stocked with lunches and coolers of ice cold lemonade and water around the fairgrounds. Every so often he stops, calls out “need a sandwich?” and groups of workers immediately appear.

“I love the interaction with people and giving back. There are so many opportunities here, from sharing the food, a smile, a joke or a shoulder to cry on – it’s all worth it,” he says.

Many fair workers recognize and speak warmly to Dwayne as he makes frequent stops around their rides and equipment. Some remember that his group also provides dinner and they inquire about what time that will be given out that day, while another exclaimed “my favorite!” as she pulled a Rice Krispie treat out of her lunch bag.

“They definitely remember us from the last year, and it’s usually because of something we said or joked about,” Dwayne says.

Jane Burrus is a nurse and member of First Baptist Columbia. She has volunteered to check blood pressure and minor medical evaluations for fair workers since 1996 and says that on average the nurses see about 25 fair workers before the fair begins. As she serves in the blood pressure clinic she also shares the gospel.

“I love being a part of local missions and enjoy being able to talk with people about Jesus,” Burrus says.

The annual state fair ministry also involves local chaplains, who circulate around the fairgrounds talking and praying with the workers before the gates officially open for business each morning. This is another way the ministry is making the gospel available to fair workers who are open to hearing a message of hope and peace.

“Vulnerability normally opens doors, and these are vulnerable people,” says Sieberhagen.