

## **\$100,000 miracle sought for shelters**

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By Nancy H. McLaughlin

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Not much surprises Michele Forrest , who seeks out the homeless in tent camps atop near-frozen earth and huddled in blankets underneath highway underpasses.

Yet, as she has passed out food and hygiene items recently, the circumstances have become even more disturbing.

"Three months ago there was a baby living with its mama in the woods, and I hadn't seen that in 10 years of outreach," said Forrest, a volunteer and leader with StreetWatch, a local ministry to help hungry and homeless people. The mother "was going from camp to camp because she thought DSS was going to take away her baby if they found out."

Such desperation leads Forrest and other homeless advocates to applaud efforts at Greensboro Urban Ministry to again set up temporary winter housing in churches, which would be in addition to what established shelters provide.

Last year the bulk of the budget for the project, \$100,000 , came from the nearly \$400,000 raised through the one-time Operation Greensboro Cares, which financed emergency food and shelter through a cold winter and sour economy. That source is not available this year, so the money has to come from someplace else.

"Yes, we are praying for a miracle," said the Rev. Mike Aiken, executive director at Urban Ministry.

Urban Ministry keeps at least one paid staff person in the shelters at all times. Last year that cost about \$83,000 — the staff at six sites were paid \$8 an hour .

The churches donate their electricity, food, space and provide volunteers. Money also is used for food, a part-time coordinator, and such items as bus passes.

That's one reason why the success of the Feast of Caring at First Baptist Church on Thursday is so important, Aiken said. A simple meal of soup and bread will be served, and those who attend are asked to make their 2010 annual pledge or gift at the event.

"We believe the community will find a way to get it done," Aiken said.

Last year's initiative was a major success on several fronts, Aiken said. The churches and one nonprofit took in up to 25 people each for the duration of the winter months.

"Relationships were developed and that became very powerful," Aiken said.

Those who had trouble getting jobs because of backgrounds in drugs or alcohol were able, through relationships developed with church volunteers, to get a chance with some employers.

Last year, 72 percent of the guests were transitioned into more permanent housing, while 61 percent were able to find full or part-time jobs through networking with church volunteers.

Still, there are people to take their places this year.

"I listen to the stories — 'Pray that I can get a job' or they don't have health insurance so they want prayer for healing," said the Rev. Helen McLaughlin , a chaplain at Urban Ministry and the pastor of FaithStep Ministries , one of two new churches to commit to the program this year.

"At night, you can find their blankets all over town," McLaughlin said.

Forrest hopes that those churches not opening their doors as emergency shelters will perhaps take a lesson from the widow's mite, a biblical story of someone who gave everything she could.

"If every church in Greensboro would give money, there would be more than enough money," Forrest said.

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## **FEAST OF CARING**

Individuals making a minimum \$20 pledge during the 18th annual Feast of Caring, 5 to 7 p.m. Thursday (First Baptist Church, 1000 W. Friendly Ave., Greensboro), can choose a handcrafted bowl donated by potters from the Seagrove area and Guilford and Rockingham counties or four of William Mangum's 2009 Holiday Honor Cards, which raise thousands annually. This year's theme is "Moving On." Donate directly to the nonprofit by going online to [greensborourbanministry.org](http://greensborourbanministry.org), calling 271-5959, Ext. 306, or sending checks to: Greensboro Urban Ministry, 305 W. Lee St., Greensboro, NC 27406.