

BY DR. CHARLES STONE JR.

WHAT DO THE HOMELESS, seekers, a Christmas party and beef jerky have in common?

A neighborhood party our family held at our home helped us build relationships with several of our unchurched neighbors.

My church called it a "Christmas Boxing Party." This pre-evangelism *on mission* project brought dozens of unchurched neighbors into church members' homes for a ministry designed to help the homeless. Its simplicity makes it possible for any size church, a Sunday school class or even a single family to successfully touch unchurched friends with a tangible picture of Christ's love.

The concept took shape in the fall of 2000 when two church members posed these questions. *Can Christians serve Christ including non-Christians in a way that would soften their hearts toward the gospel? Would shared servanthood, believer with unbeliever, prove attractive to unbelievers?*

That discussion led to this project that intertwined pre-evangelism with servanthood. A delightful surprise resulted when more than 30 unchurched people attended one of our 20 parties the first Christmas. The next year more than 60 seekers plus kids attended one of 30 parties. After two successful years, our church now makes this ministry an annual *on mission* project.



Christmas Boxing Party

Touching nonbelievers with a tangible picture of Christ's love



So what happens at a Christmas Boxing Party?

It looks like a normal birthday party, except guests bring unwrapped items homeless adults need such as toothbrushes, beef jerky and soap. My wife, Sherryl, and I hosted a party in early December last year, and we invited our neighbors. To our delight, several came. Jay and Yuco who live across the street brought their three kids. An unchurched mom named Karen, whom we barely knew, brought her daughter Sarah. My Muslim neighbor's wife, Eva, couldn't stay, but she brought several items just as we began the party. LeJay, an unchurched teenager in our cul-de-sac, brought

items his grandmother had purchased. Eight unchurched neighbors attended, two others stayed briefly and three church families also came.

As our neighbors arrived, we munched on cookies and sipped punch while Christmas music played in the background. After 30 minutes I thanked everyone who came and said, "Our church wants to model the love of Christ to the needy this Christmas season. In a few days our church will deliver these gifts to a local homeless shelter.

When the homeless receive them, they will experience a tangible expression of Christ's love."

We piled all the items on the floor. Then we sorted, filled and wrapped at least 10 boxes. The whole party took about an hour and everyone enjoyed it. As they left I gave them an invitation to our church's Christmas program scheduled two weeks later.

We discovered three reasons why this *on mission* project worked well for pre-evangelism. First, believers otherwise hesitant to share their faith found it easy to invite unchurched friends into their homes to serve the needy. Second, we discovered that many of them want to help the less fortunate, especially around Christmas. These parties capitalized on that desire and modeled what they believe Christians should do: help the less fortunate.

Third, it gave all the parents an occasion for their kids to focus more on others during the holiday season. As Karen left our party that night she remarked, “I appreciate this opportunity for my kids to think about giving instead of getting.”

To carry out a Christmas Boxing Party, we followed these seven steps.

1. Keep pre-evangelism the priority.

We could have limited the project to church member involvement only, but pre-evangelism is a priority for my family and so we invited others to join us. Unsure of how my neighbors would react, I felt nervous when I invited them. However, without exception every neighbor I spoke with liked the idea.

2. Determine how to distribute the boxes.

A homeless shelter agreed to distribute most of the boxes while several church members delivered theirs directly. We targeted homeless adults after the shelter explained that adults often get overlooked at Christmas because most organizations focus on children.

3. Partner with other church members.

My wife and I didn't know everyone in our neighborhood, and we wanted other Christians to team with us. So, we asked two other church families who live nearby to co-sponsor the party. We asked them to invite their neighbors, arrive early for prayer and bring Christmas snacks. Their attendance guaranteed a group large enough to avoid the awkwardness that can happen when a group is too small.

4. Create a quality, detailed invitation.

We created an attractive half-page invitation with a computer word processor. On the invitation we answered these questions.

What is a boxing party?

What church sponsors the party? (This identified its Christian aspect).

When and where is the party? (We included our address, phone number and a map).

What should I bring?

After our first year when some people brought fancy soaps and perfumes, we began to specify the items home-

less adults need. Our list included blankets, socks, combs and brushes, gloves, scarves, sock caps, soap, deodorant, shampoo, beef jerky, water bottles, toothbrushes and toothpaste.

No event in our church ever resulted in such a high percentage of seeker involvement.

5. Hand-deliver the invitations.

Prior to the party I delivered a set of invitations to the co-sponsors so they could invite their neighbors. I then invited a half-dozen of my closest neighbors. To avoid the Thanksgiving holiday and minimize conflicts with company parties and other church events, we held our party the first week in December.

6. Prepare for the boxing party.

Several days before our party we began to pray that God would bring our neighbors. We also gathered these items: cardboard boxes (each about a foot square), Bibles, gospel tracts, wrapping paper and enough items to fill at least two boxes. The afternoon of the party I crafted what I would say to the group so I would avoid spiritual pushiness. That night I placed a small

table at our front door where I laid out nametags and invitations to our church's upcoming Christmas presentation.

7. Relax and enjoy the party.

God amazed us when 20 people showed up. After we finished, we took pictures as everyone stood around a dozen beautifully wrapped presents.

After Christmas when the leadership reviewed the project's overall impact, we realized that 400 homeless adults received a box. Most important, one-third of the adults who attended a party we identified as seekers. No event in our church ever resulted in such a high percentage of seeker involvement. Sue, one of the hosts, summed it up well when she wrote, “It was a Christ-centered activity that made non-Christians glad to be involved to help others, especially in contrast to the Christmas rush.”

Our Christmas Boxing Party gave our family a simple non-threatening *on mission* tool that touched our neighbors with a taste of authentic Christianity. I can't wait until next year.

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Boxing party pointers

1. Get to know your seeker neighbors before you invite them. This will make the invitation feel more natural.

2. Model Christ's love at the party. Don't preach.

3. After the box distribution, share the results with your neighbors. It may open a door for further spiritual conversation. My Muslim friend whose wife brought some items that night later invited us to his brother's Muslim wedding reception. We attended, and I then invited him to a Sunday church service. He graciously came and said he enjoyed it.

4. If your church sponsors several parties, give each host a disposable camera for pictures.

5. Make reprints of the pictures you take, and give them to your seeker friends with a handwritten thank-you.

6. Bring leftover items to the church to combine with other hosts' leftovers. We filled several more boxes from the leftovers.

7. Check with your local homeless shelter to find out the items they recommend for such a project.

8. Invite your neighbors at least a week before your party and follow up with a reminder a couple days before.



JOHN SWAN