

Offering a Healing Presence

In response to the health-care needs of their community, Trinity Covenant Church in Salem, Oregon, has opened a monthly free medical clinic. | CHRIS HAYDON

They begin to gather by 2 a.m., huddled in blankets in a haphazard line under the shelter of the church eaves. They know that no one who arrives after 6 a.m. will be served. The clinic does not open until 8 a.m., but its limit of thirty-four patients will be reached long before the people stop coming.

This day we will reluctantly send away more than twenty-five neighbors in need. Next month it will be many more. Four months into our new ministry, we have already maxed out our resources and are immediately faced with the need to increase our capacity.

The first members of the clinic's staff arrive at 7:30 to put on the coffee and prepare breakfast. The patients wait quietly in the foyer. Within minutes they are urged to come into the community center where gallons of hot coffee and dozens of muffins have been prepared for them. While they are warming up and relaxing, nearly forty people from church arrive and prepare their stations. Andy Harris, a retired ophthalmologist and the clinic's medical director, gathers everyone—staff and patients—together for prayer, thanking Jesus for his love, for our neighbors, and for the chance to serve



them. The Salem Free Medical Clinic at Trinity Covenant Church is open.

The night before the clinic opens each month, our church is transformed into a makeshift hospital, under a banner that reads, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Sunday-school classrooms become exam rooms; the gymnasium, a cafeteria and waiting room; our fellowship space, a dispensary; the conference room, a mental health center; the foyer, an admissions office and nursing triage; and the library, a place for prayer. A hallway stores the medical records. Every surface is sanitized, signs are posted throughout the church, and folding tables and chairs create the appearance of offices.

As clinic workers busily prepare, children from our afterschool program run laughing through the

hallways. Homeless families who have lived in our church for the past week pack up to move on to their next church haven. In the midst of all the commotion, Andy jokes, "I wish our church could be used more often." I smile, proud of our congregation and thankful to God for their faithfulness and love.

On the morning of the clinic, Keeta Lauderdale, the clinic coordinator, arrives early to prepare for the arrival of the patients, whom she calls "guests." Her respectful attitude permeates the atmosphere of the clinic. In turn, we refer to the staff as "servants," not volunteers, reflecting our commitment to reaching out to our community with Christlike compassion.

"We get to love and serve as Jesus loves us," Keeta explains to anyone who asks why we do this. That love is extended to each patient-guest as he or she enters our church. Months of tireless planning and preparation in countless meetings are forgotten as Keeta greets strangers in need as if they were family.

She laughs as she recalls our first day of operation—the exam rooms were ready, examination equipment in place, medical supplies stocked, volunteer staff prepared. Within the



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first hour, however, we encountered an unexpected need: a little girl with an infected toe needed a band-aid. We didn't have any! A quick errand to the drugstore remedied the oversight.

The clinic is open the second Saturday morning of each month. Each guest is warmly greeted at the welcome desk by Stan Holme, a retired physician, and by Marsha Griffiths, a school counselor. They offer each person a number that will be used not only to serve them in order, but to protect patient confidentiality. Stan and Marsha also have the terrible task of informing latecomers that they cannot be seen that day.

Individuals are then escorted to admissions, where their medical file is started and their needs assessed. Life stories begin to unfold as strangers

share with strangers intimate details of their circumstances. A trust develops, born of need and hope.

Patients sip coffee and eat breakfast in the waiting area until they are called to the triage desk. Experienced nurses—both active and retired—check vital signs and collect further information. There is little privacy, but each person is treated with compassion and respect. Many who come to the clinic have serious medical conditions that have long been left untreated—hypertension, diabetes, respiratory, and mental health issues are among the most common. Some are homeless, most are working poor, others can no longer afford insurance. Their children may be covered by public health care, but the adults have no other resources available. Some

are parents of children who attend our afterschool program. Many need lapsed prescriptions filled but cannot afford a doctor's visit to renew them. They often go without needed medicine for months.

For two years Trinity Covenant Church had prayed for a vision of how we could expand our ministry to our immediate neighborhood. Through the parents of children in our afterschool program we learned that medical, dental, and mental health care were significant needs. Andy had already become familiar with the Salem Free Medical Clinic in our city, which operates one Saturday a month out of a junior high school and is staffed by volunteers from two

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local churches. As members of our church observed that clinic in action, we began to envision how we could create one in our church to address similar needs in our part of the community. One year and many hours of planning and preparation later, our clinic opened this past fall, partnering with the Salem Free Medical Clinic.

We applied for a grant from the denomination's Compassion, Mercy, and Justice Initiative, through the North Pacific Conference. Community fund-raising and support from our congregation will help us continue our operation in the face of the cost of supplies, medications dispensed, and food served for each month's clinic. There were many hurdles that seemed insurmountable at times, but through faithful persistence our congregation saw God's hand guiding and empowering and making all things possible.

Our operating policy is firm and clear: we offer medical service to our neighbors free of charge, motivated by our love for Jesus. We are federally insured under a tort agreement, and strictly follow all guidelines under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act for patient protection. We also partner with community agencies that provide free medications and referrals to doctors who volunteer specialized care. In addition, we provide information for dental, clothing, and food needs, and treat patients with both professionalism and genuine compassion.

Lucy Hewitt and her husband, Tom, are both local schoolteachers. Together they serve as "runners," escorting patients to exam rooms for their appointments with one of our four physicians, then walking them back to the waiting area while their prescriptions are filled. They chat with each guest warmly, trying to help them feel at home in God's house.

Ann Alway runs the dispensary, filling the prescriptions that the runners

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bring from doctors, often providing a two-week supply of medication to carry patients through until MedAssist can provide free drugs. Antibiotics, anti-depressants, inhalers, and blood pressure pills come from a supply that must be constantly replenished. Ann is a nursing administrator at Salem Hospital and, like the other doctors and nurses here, gives her time to see patients who otherwise would not receive care. "It's exciting to sit here for a few months and see people come back looking so much better," she says, beaming. "We get attached to our patients," she continues, but then she is interrupted. "José," she greets a Hispanic neighbor, "you look ten years younger! Your medications are working!"

Down the hallway, Keeta is bringing a woman to the prayer room. She arrived with her handicapped son too late to be seen, but Keeta hugged her, talked with her, and asked her if she would like to pray with someone. She said yes—not because she wanted prayer for healing from her medical needs, but to seek hope, strength, and some assurance from God. Dick Alway, a local attorney, prays with her, and the pain and pressure in her face ease while she clutches Dick's hand in prayer.

"These are people often at life's extremities," Dick says, explaining his deep commitment to this ministry. "When we pray for their needs together, it reaches a part of their life that medication doesn't—a place in their soul only the Holy Spirit can fill."

At the clinic, an enthusiastic wel-

come is as important as wellness, and compassion is as critical as medical care.

An older man brings in his eight-month-pregnant granddaughter. She's had no prenatal care. A heavy-set man holds free boxes of inhalers, able to breathe freely for the first time in months. A physician recognizes the signs of attempted suicide, and a woman agrees to leave with a Salem police officer to be escorted to a psychiatric unit. People who arrive desperate and tense but full of hope leave laughing and talking with church members, holding boxed lunches stuffed with nutritious food.

A man pauses at the door to say, "Pastor, thank you for doing this. It is really needed. Thank God for your people. They treated me with such kindness. They really helped me."

I know how he feels. Our make-shift clinic is the kingdom of God, where I meet Jesus in the love and the listening and the laughter, in the hurt and the fear and the need, in the hope and the joy of strangers meeting in the places of our deepest human condition.

The next morning at our worship service time, the woman who came too late to be treated the day before greets Keeta with a hug. "I told you I'd be here," she says. No longer a stranger or even a guest, but a sister.

Our medical clinic will do little to address the injustices of a society perverted by materialism and blinded by selfishness to the needs of our neighbors. But we have the chance to impact the lives of the few we can reach with the love of Christ, and we are grateful to God.

"Then the king will say...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you cared for me" (Matthew 25:34-36). ■