

DATE: 5/7/09

SOURCE: The Christian Index

HEADLINE: No Place To Go: Whitfield County Churches Helping Homeless, Hurting Students Amid Economic Downturn

# The Christian Index

## No place to go

*Whitfield County churches helping homeless, hurting students amid economic downturn*

By Scott Barkley, Production Editor

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DALTON — To Jennifer Schneider, it's not much. A can of chili. A box of cereal. A jug of milk. To the family, though, it's more. A lot more.

In times when words such as "sluggish," "slow," and "stalled," have become almost cliché in describing the economy, another is being heard more often by educators: homeless. Images of adults sleeping under a bridge change places with second graders showing up on a 30-degree morning wearing short sleeves and no backpack.

"A lot of our kids have been affected by the economy," said Schneider, counselor at Antioch Elementary School. "Often our teachers have no idea until a child or parent asks for help. Their pride keeps them from asking us."

Antioch Baptist Church, located near the school, has been instrumental in providing supplies and clothes to children all year, she added.

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"At the beginning they brought items for our kindergartners, but then began bringing supplies each month for another grade level," Schneider said.

"It's helped us out so much. The kids get really excited, because most of them know it's the only way they will get anything."

If unemployment were a bull, Dalton would be the red cape held by a mannequin matador.

A recession hits everyone – even the repo business isn't what it used to be – but add in a local economy based on new homes and carpet to go in those homes and the result is what you see in Whitfield County.

Figures released in March show Dalton and its surrounding area carrying an unemployment rate of 13.7 percent – nearby Rome is the only other metro area in the state to even hit double digits.

The numbers reflect a recently released study by The National Center on Family Homelessness. Conducted from 2005-06, it revealed more than 1.5 million children in the country "living in families [that] had no place to call home."

Of that 1.5 million, more than 58,000 live in Georgia. That's enough to fill Bobby Dodd Stadium for a Tech game with a few thousand still outside. Ditto for an afternoon with the Braves at Turner Field. A little more than half would make into Six Flags before the park would reach full capacity.

All told, Georgia holds the distinction of placing 49th among states in preventing child homelessness.

"It was my father's idea to start the program," explained Whitney Cantrell, crediting the church's pastor, Don Cantrell. "With the economy being so bad, we'd heard of parents unable to provide basic school supplies for their children. Teachers are stretched enough as it is and can't afford to provide for that many students.

"The progress of this has increased tremendously," added Whitney Cantrell, who oversees the partnership. "I'm so proud of the way people in the church have participated."

A pack of markers may not sound like a whole lot, but anything contributing to normalcy can help a child through what is a nomadic situation, said Teresa Sefcik, a school social worker and homeless liaison with Whitfield County Schools.

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Kellie Olson, a third grade teacher at Antioch Elementary School in Dalton, shows off some materials provided by nearby Antioch Baptist Church. Members of the congregation have been donating materials to several grades at the school since the beginning of the school year.

“It’s very distressing for students. It places them at risk for a lot of things,” stated Sefcik. “Highly mobile children are at a disproportionate risk to not complete school. A University of Chicago study said that every time a student moves they lose 3-4 months of instruction.

“Transfer a lot and there is no consistency in their education. In younger grades they don’t get the foundation they need. It builds up and affects them in their later years.”

### **Providing promise**

In addition, children must wrestle with societal adjustments, she added. They can be aggressive or act out; they may also become withdrawn. Social skills suffer as well.

One venture hoping to re-establish families to normalcy is the Family Promise Program. Through it, congregations offer up their facilities for a week to a homeless family. Church members provide meals.

Children go to school or daycare as parents attend job training or look for employment.

Based in Summit, N.J., Family Promise has chapters throughout the nation across denominations, including Georgia locations in Athens, Augusta, Columbus, Gwinnett County, and Savannah. Whitfield County is its newest partner. One in DeKalb County is under development.

“We divided up the responsibility among different Sunday School classes for each night, with one family taking care of a separate night,” said Gerald Merritt, Local Missions Committee chairman for Grove Level Baptist in Dalton who also serves as the church’s contact for Family Promise of Whitfield County. “We probably had more than 100 volunteers for it, but couldn’t use them all.”

