



## BAREFOOT BELIEVERS: MINISTRY ON THE BEACH

By Sammie Jo Barstow

Sand sculpting competitions. Face painting. Movie nights at an RV park. Volleyball tournaments on the beach. Crafts tables for kids at a shrimp festival.

Yes, those are all fun beach activities, but for Nate Diehl, a career missionary appointed through the North American Mission Board, these activities are also exciting opportunities for ministry. The Barefoot Believers ministry is a strong and vibrant witness for the Lord on the Gulf. It is another unique way your gifts through the Cooperative Program are used.



As director of Barefoot Believers, a resort ministry sponsored through the Baldwin Baptist Association, Diehl leads approximately 30 mission teams each year to minister in various ways along the gulf coast of Alabama. Tourists, winter visitors (people from northern states who spend the cold months in the South), and full-time employees in the Gulf Shores/Orange Beach area participate in year-around activities offered through the partnership of the association with the North American Mission Board and the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

When more than 300,000 people descend on the Gulf Coast for the annual Shrimp Festival on the second weekend in October, Nate is ready. He coordinates several teams of volunteers who work primarily through the Children's Activity Village. Free popcorn and snow cones attract the children to the area, and volunteers teach the children a variety of crafts.

Shelba Benson, a member of First Baptist Church of Alabaster, Alabama, has coordinated the crafts activities for the past two years and plans on doing the same job in October 2010. Her senior adult ministry takes more than 20 church members to prepare craft supplies, teach the crafts, and prepare meals for the volunteers. Although the mission teams are not allowed to pass out pamphlets with a spiritual message during the Shrimp Festival, they do help the children make salvation bracelets out of beads and sometimes pass out bottled water with scripture on the label.

According to Benson, "We're there to show the children we care about them. This also gives our senior adults a chance to do hands-on missions away from our usual environment at home." One table displays a sign designating it as the prayer table, and volunteers are there to pray with anyone who comes with a prayer request.

Ministry in the RV parks is especially effective during the Shrimp Festival because of high population during that time, but volunteer teams coordinate activities at the parks throughout the year. According to Diehl, "That might be anything from a movie night, concert, or family carnival. It just depends on what the mission teams come prepared to do," he said.

During the winter months, winter visitors are the primary target for ministry. Diehl coordinates worship services in five areas, including several RV parks. "At Thanksgiving and Christmas, we'll provide the meat for the meal and people can bring other dishes to go with it. It's just a great fellowship time for us to connect with the people who are spending the winter in our area."

Some winter visitors return year after year, spending four to six months on the coast. Connecting consistently over the years provides many opportunities for ministry for Diehl as well as local churches. Occasionally Diehl or MSC (Mission Service Corps) volunteers are asked to officiate at weddings or even memorial services as a result of relationships built through ministry opportunities.

Of course, spring break weeks in March and April are prime times for beach ministry. Thousands of college students travel to the beaches for a welcome break from school, and Nate depends greatly on student mission teams from several states to staff day camps and backyard Bible clubs during that time. “Beach Reach” also includes a sand sculpting competition. Nate described one team that sculpted “The Roman Road.” Judges are enlisted from people on the beach, and as they judge the various sculptures, they hear the stories behind each one. In this case, the mission team was able to tell them the significance of the sculpture and the story of salvation according to the scriptures in the book of Romans.

Rick Barnhart, Director of Missions for Baldwin Baptist Association, sees another important benefit of the beach resort ministry. “We are able to use the gulf area resort ministry to help train upcoming ministers and to help summer missionaries understand whether this might be something they have a calling to be involved in. It’s like a mentoring project through the summer with some of these students returning their second and third year to serve in resort ministry. That’s an exciting aspect of being involved with young people as they make decisions about what God might be leading them to do. It’s an opportunity for them to see that they can be a critical part of the kingdom work in worship leadership and helping teams understand how to do beach ministry and how to minister especially in nontraditional settings.”

Although fun activities are the drawing card for Barefoot Believers, Nate emphasizes that what he and the volunteer teams do is much more than playing games on the beach. “It’s genuine ministry,” he said. “We get to minister to hundreds of unbelievers during the year, perhaps just a moment of conversation, and sometimes to share the message of salvation.”

If your group would like to participate in the ministry of Barefoot Believers, consider any of the following possibilities. Mail supplies, gift cards, etc. to: Nate Diehl, Baldwin Baptist Association, P. O. Box 459, Silverhill, AL 36576.

- Gift cards for stores such as Walmart, Publix, and other large chains. Much of the ministry depends on providing food, soft drinks, and bottled water during beach activities.
- Craft supplies, such as beading supplies, face paint, rolls of hemp thread for making salvation bracelets.
- Paper supplies, such as construction paper, glue sticks, or crayons.

Prayer requests:

- Pray for God’s direction for mission teams as they plan activities.
- Pray for safety for Nate, his family, and all the volunteers.
- Pray that Alabama Baptists will remain strong in their Cooperative Program giving.
- Pray for volunteers to have many opportunities to share the Gospel and for boldness in witnessing.
- Pray for responsiveness of those who hear the message of salvation.
- Pray that the current oil spill in the gulf will be contained and will not affect Alabama beaches or interrupt the ministry.

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Sammie Jo Barstow is a freelance writer living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and wishing she was at the beach.