

LIFT MINISTRY

Ashley's Story:
by Heather Ashley Ives

Should Christians speak when evangelizing? Some might say spouting off verse after verse of Scripture is the way to win others to Christ. Others think conversations about knowing God rank up there in importance. As far-fetched as it may seem, it's possible that we witness best when our mouths remain shut and our hearts remain open.

Some time ago, my pastor-husband and I discussed the need for stronger outreach at our church. We thought serving those in our own backyard was just the thing. We knew Tina* from our neighborhood. The church knew her family from various times needs were expressed and met by the congregation.

My husband played an instrumental role in Tina's brother coming to Christ; and just months before, our church helped the family after the loss of Tina's father. Suddenly three children were left fatherless and Tina's mother a widow. Adding to this complicated situation, Tina found herself facing an unplanned pregnancy. This family was in no shape to minister to each other, much less to a young, unmarried girl now dealing with an unplanned pregnancy.

Enter: The church

Statistics show that only five percent of the single parent family population attends church regularly. And when various reports find that over a quarter of adults in America are divorced or raising children alone, we miss a huge chunk of the population. What is the church to do? We certainly want to lead women with unplanned pregnancies away from the drastic decision of abortion. However, what does the church do once she chooses life?

A friend of mine, who grew up in Sunday School, attended VBS, and sang the Lord's praises, suddenly found the church an unwelcoming place when she discovered she was pregnant before marriage. Although in college and able to work more than some young pregnant women, she struggled with her family, the newness of a rushed marriage, and where God sat in the midst of it all. The church failed to take her in and show her God's love. The church became a hostile environment where love and acceptance were neither expected nor given to her. However, once she 'righted' the situation by getting married, the church decided they could welcome her back after the birth of her baby.

What about the unwed mothers who choose not to marry their baby's fathers? In some cases, the father cannot be found. In other cases, such as Tina's, marrying the baby's father would prove harmful, if not dangerous, for all parties. When an abusive situation becomes an abusive situation with a baby, the church might find itself playing a different role. In Tina's case, we knew meeting her physical needs outweighed the objective of winning her back to church right away. If we could reach out to her and show her God's love, show her that despite her circumstances and how she arrived there, that we still loved her, the chance existed that the Lord could forever impact her life.

But what would this look like? Christians can preach, sing, and tell others about God's love for them, but something practical, something creative, showing a physical statement of God's love, was needed. What could be more practical than a baby shower for any mom-to-be? A shower from an entire congregation to show our love to someone struggling and unsure of God's love in a difficult time. Approaching the idea with closed mouths and open hearts, plans came together for a baby shower sponsored by the church.

After setting a date, and dealing with the few who thought this inappropriate, the church prepared for its first baby shower for an unwed mother. The Saturday morning of the shower dawned bright, and as the hour grew close, we gathered balloons, put finishing touches on decorations, and lifted a prayer to God that He would use this time as He saw fit.

A number of ladies volunteered to cook, organize games, and help hostess. I thought we were prepared. I thought we would have 15 to 20 attend and hoped Tina could see the outpouring of love from a church who barely knew her. What I had not prepared for were the 25 women from our congregation who showed up and the additional 20 friends and family Tina invited.

Before lunch, we wanted to welcome those who weren't familiar with our church or know those hosting the shower. All the ladies from our congregation were asked to stand. This proved the most effective outreach tool of the day as women around the room stood and smiled.

The gasp from those not connected to our church made its way around. Tina didn't know many of those who came that day, but her hand quickly reached for her heart as she realized the enormity of our love for her. The friends and family who came to support her also realized that our church cared for this young girl and saw our intentions to stand with her.

While eating, you could see the socio-economic barriers fall. Congregants mingled and shared food with wounded Christians not finding church a priority, practicing Christians from other denominations, and those who never set foot in a church before. The lighthearted fun continued with games and cake, all a celebration and show of love by reaching out to someone in need.

Showers revolve around the all-important gift opening time. In the Bible, the Wise Men bring Jesus gifts as a symbol of love and respect. For Tina's shower, the gifts spilled off the table onto the floor and against the wall. Pastel wrapping paper and big bows adorned the gifts carefully chosen for an unborn baby. Although most in attendance from the church didn't know Tina, their love for her manifested itself that day in baby bottles, blankets, and diapers.

Strangers reached out and dug deep, far beyond what I prayed for, to spoil Tina and her unborn son for the Lord. All physical needs for a baby were met that day. A crib was bought and presented; a much needed car seat and stroller had been purchased. It took a few cars and trucks to carry all the merchandise home. It took a few church members reaching out to pull someone in from the "backyard." It took only a few hours to impact the lives of many that day - most importantly, a mom in need and her unborn baby boy.

*Names have been changed.