

Changing a community, one family at a time

Whilst many South Africans are sincere in wanting to make a difference in their communities, many either simply do not know where to start or are paralyzed by the overwhelming extent of the need out there.

The purpose of this article is to offer hope and inspiration, to show that there are many good reasons and opportunities to get involved and that we can help to shift the overwhelming odds together by changing one family at a time.

On the northern outskirts of Gqeberha, a very impoverished and neglected community live in abject poverty.

According to statistics, which are sparse, the community in Kleinskool and Kliprand appear to be one of the most impoverished and neglected in our metro.

Yet, more than two decades ago, the plight of the community moved the heart of a local businessman, Pieter Kleinschmidt, to purchase a plot in Kleinskool and to erect a community hall with the aim of assisting, serving and uplifting the community in the area.

In partnership with Pastor Boet and Annetjie Walker, a ministry was established where a weekly feeding scheme was implemented, employment skills were taught by volunteers, daily caring took place and a weekly church service was provided for adults and children to cater for both their physical and spiritual needs.

After their retirement and with the co-operation of Mr Kleinschmidt's family, the community project was taken over and expanded by a local church in the city. Many current ministries still operate from the community hall and continue making a difference by assisting one individual and one family at a time.

One of those is a Swop Shop ministry run once a week by church volunteers and staff employed from the community.

In essence and in order to maintain a measure of dignity for all, members of the community are encouraged to collect plastic bottles and other plastic for recycling purposes.

Once a week the collected plastic can be swapped for tokens which enable them to purchase basic nutritional food, toiletries, school stationery, clothing for all sizes, toys and other donated household items.

These items are stocked weekly in a Swop Shop situated on the community hall property.

The items are provided at less than cost and are for the most part sponsored by church members, businesses and partly by the proceeds received through recycling.

Between 2019 and 2020, an average of between 90 to 100 families per week have benefitted directly from this initiative. The need is especially evident when children choose to purchase basic food items rather than toys or sweets.

Hunger and poverty are being tackled one family at a time through a process which is more of a hand-up than a hand-out, thus enhancing dignity and self-worth.

The added benefit has been that between three to five tons of plastic per week has been recycled, totalling a staggering 123 000 tons per year.

Another hand-up initiative is a ministry called Farming God's Way, which offers free and effective training to members of the community on how to plant and maintain profitable vegetable gardens on a small scale.

A model vegetable farm under irrigation is run adjacent to the community hall and is an ideal setting for training, but it also provides much-needed fresh produce for the weekly Swop Shop.

Many families have benefitted from their very own vegetable gardens, which have also in some instances added much-needed extra income.

Work 4 A Living is a ministry that has been running in the Kleinskool Community Centre for six years and has had remarkable success.

In 2019 a total of 324 students was trained in basic work skills, ethics, CV compilation, job interview skills etc.

Of these students, 82% have since secured gainful employment at many reputable companies across our metro.

These range from a young man becoming a store manager at a well-known supermarket chain, an ex-convict starting a muffin baking business, now known as "The Muffin Man", a young lady becoming the manager of a coffee franchise and many similar examples.

These people are changing their community for the better, one family at a time. As one of the facilitators of Work 4 A Living at Kleinskool commented: "Seeing a student evolve in front of my eyes excites me. I know it's not me but the strength that the Lord has invested in me and I am forever grateful".

Despite the overwhelming need in many of our communities, the initiative at Kleinskool is but one of numerous similar ministries run by many churches in our metro, each of which is making a significant difference in the communities they are called to serve.

That is, after all, the mission of the church, the reason for its existence.

We are here to love God and to love and serve others and disciple them into life in Christ.

The church is making a difference where it really matters.

Rather than throwing up our hands in despair at the magnitude of the challenge, perhaps we should be using those same hands to reach out to help others up.

Join a local church and become part of the solution, one family at a time.

Pastor Daan Botha: Harvest Christian Church