Opening doors to sharing the gospel through Mobile Dental Unit

Despite being sidelined with a rare kidney disease and several small strokes, volunteer Jennifer Smith of Lake City serves as lead coordinator of the Florida Baptist Convention’s Mobile Dental Unit. In this role, she travels across the state to help dentists and health care providers as they meet dentistry needs of the poor and uninsured.

The 40-year-old mother of four finds patients “terrified” when seated in the dental chair. She prays with them and talks with them about Christ. “While this is a gift,” she tells them, “the bigger gift is the gift of salvation through Christ.”

This simple introduction “opens the door to share the gospel of Christ,” she said.

“You also open doors through helping hands,” she added. “You can tell people about Christ and you can show them Christ in you as you serve them.”

The Convention’s Mobile Dental Unit is a bus that travels across the state—from Pensacola to the Keys, setting up a temporary clinic on the grounds of sponsoring churches and associations. Church leaders organize volunteer services of dentists and dental assistants, and recruit patients for treatment.

The unit provides basic dentistry, such as fillings and tooth extractions. The state-of-the-art mobile dental unit contains two treatment rooms, each equipped with x-ray equipment, fiber-optic hand pieces, supplies and instruments needed for basic dentistry.

As one of the volunteer mobile dental coordinators, Smith, a certified nursing assistant (CNA) is assigned to assist with sterilization and location of the instruments.

For needy patients the unit is a lifeline to a life without pain and with positive self-esteem. Poor dental health can even affect employment in many severe cases. When the patients arrive at the clinic, “they are in desperate need,” said Smith.

Nearly 2,500 patients were treated by dentists through the Mobile Dental Unit in the past year; 168 accepted Christ as Savior.

In June, Cornerstone Baptist Fellowship in Sebastian sponsored its first dental project. Bringing the clinic there was suggested by Vero Beach Dentist Holly Hamilton, a Cornerstone member, who had volunteered at the unit when it was stationed at First Baptist Church of Merritt Island.

“There are many people here with needs,” she said. “We can provide this service for people who have a real medical emergency. I have seen patients die due to dental infection. We have to let people know how crucial proper dental treatment is to their life.”

Hamilton enlisted local, volunteer dentists and gave her own time as well. “In reality, we should help people, give back to our community. As a Christian, I have the ability to reach out, model Christian behavior and serve others in every way I can.”

“God moved my heart to bring it here and He brings the patients who are supposed to be here,” she said.

The clinic treated 24 patients—including two children—during its stay in Sebastian. One of those was Deanna, who was experiencing hard times when she and her daughter arrived at the Cornerstone Church.

She had endured a long-time dental issue, living with acute pain, she said, when someone sent her information of the clinic through social media. “I’m so grateful,” she said. “You don’t see too many good people who care these days.”

Now that Cornerstone has gotten its feet wet with its first clinic, said clinic coordinator Bill Sistler, they have learned a few things. And have already scheduled the Unit to return next June.

The Mobile Dental Unit and its much needed ministry are supported by Florida Baptists’ gifts to the Maguire State Mission Offering, information emblazoned on the bus itself.

In 2016, $8,000 is earmarked for the ministry.

According to retired Cornerstone Pastor Stan Sparkman, the small congregation surpasses its state mission offering goal every year.

“It is one of my favorite offerings because of all the ministries that are made possible in the state, nation and world. It makes a lot of ministry in this state happen.”