

# Mission to Mississippi

*When church women think outside the box*

By Jennifer Archibald  
Staff writer

When women of the Flora First Christian Church make their annual trip to Mississippi, they're on a mission.

They know what they're doing. They've planned and carried out such trips since 1983.

They go to give. They give food, clothing, and household items to poor families living in the Mississippi Delta. They received the names through a national program called the Box Project.

They send things throughout the year also, but they say it's through the face-to-face contact that they've come to know and care about the families they help.

This year marked the church ladies' 25th annual trip to Mississippi.

The relationship started in 1972 when the church women first learned about the Box Project. Established 45 years ago, the project called for people from all over the U.S. to take the name of a poverty-stricken family in Mississippi and send a monthly box of things they needed, especially food. The Box Project required that the family write back, acknowledging the receipt of the package.

The Flora church requested a family and packed monthly boxes for several years.

In 1982, two church couples, Cullan and Becky Eikenberry and Bill and Pat Helvie were on a trip to Texas and on West when Becky asked if they could stop in the Greenwood, Miss., area to see the church's Box Project family.

Becky concedes that her original purpose in the unannounced visit was to see if the family was really needy.

It wasn't easy finding the home of Jesse Amos, but they finally did.

Becky said Jesse lived in a shack and had "absolutely nothing."

"She was so sweet," Becky said. Before arriving at her house, the Eikenberrys and Helvies had stopped and bought fruit, eggs, milk and other things that they hadn't been able to send in the boxes. Becky said the gifts were well received.

The next summer, a group of the church ladies wanted to make the trip. On that first offi-



**2007 trip**  
Women from the Flora First Christian Church who went on this year's mission trip to Mississippi are pictured above, standing, l-r - Becky Eikenberry, Nancy Hicks, Lisa McIlrath, Teresa McGill, Jeanne Thornburg, Carissa Hicks, Kelsie Thornburg, Pat Helvie, Sandy Martin. They are shown with Deloise Williams, who is the daughter of the first person the church met through the Box Project. For more information on the project, which matches sponsors with families in the Mississippi Delta and other poverty-stricken regions in the U.S., go to [www.boxproject.org](http://www.boxproject.org). Photo provided

cial trip - an announced visit this time - 12 ladies went and made plans to go back the next year.

In time, the church took on more Box Project families. Some individual families in the church joined in the mission, sending their own boxes to additional families each month.

Over the past 25 years, 43 different women have made the trip. The number going each year has ranged from four to 18. The number of families they visited has ranged from four to 10.

Nancy Hicks and Jeanne Thornburg have made all 25 trips to Mississippi. Pat Helvie has gone all but one year, and Glenda Oilar has only missed a few. Becky has made three-fourths of the trips, and others have gone one or more times.

Over the 25 visits, they have watched children grow up, they've held new babies, and they've placed flowers in cemeteries.

Jesse Amos died two months after the women made their first trip, and they bought a headstone for her grave.

They continued helping her family. Jesse's granddaughter, Rose, was just six that first year, in 1983. The church women later helped her with college expenses, and were happy for her when she found a good job and got married.

"Some families are doing better, and others are worse-off than when we first went to Mississippi," Becky said.



Mississippi home in 1992

They have some lingering memories from the early years. Becky and Pat recall deteriorating homes with porches falling in, dirt yards, light showing through the walls, and empty cupboards.

"In one house, the only thing



we saw that was edible was a portion of a jar of mayonnaise. The jar was sitting on the table with a knife in it, in 100 degree heat," Becky said.

The women have also been in homes where the family was so afraid of theft that they chained the refrigerator to the wall. If they were going to leave the house, they took anything they considered of any value with them and put it in their trunk.

That's if they had a car. Many still have no form of transportation.

"If they have cars, they're usually broken down, and if they have refrigerators, there's little or nothing in them, but they all have TV's," Becky said.

For several years, the women loaded up one or two vans with food and clothing and hauled everything to Mississippi. Then they decided it was smarter to buy groceries there and take the children shopping for clothes.

Becky said they've also found that it is more practical to send a gift card every other month than to pack and ship boxes monthly. They say they can do this when they know the families and know they will buy what they need.

Every year, the First Christian Church has had "Toy Sunday,"

where children bring in a new or gently used toy to send to Mississippi. Sometimes these are the only toys the recipient families have.

Becky said most of the families are very appreciative of the gifts.

"One lady clapped her hands when we gave her a roast," Pat said.

Another lady, Alberta Ramsey, invited the group of ladies to church one time, and they have continued the tradition for 14 years. The church is the New Zion Missionary Baptist.

Nancy said the group took Alberta out to lunch, as usual. Ten years ago they wanted to take Alberta to a certain restaurant, but she said people of color were not welcome there and she would not feel comfortable. The women said they would not eat in the restaurant until things changed. This year, for the first time, they were able to take Alberta and her son there, and everything was fine.

The Flora women have gained attention for their efforts with the Box Project. On last year's trip, they were interviewed extensively for a radio broadcast on the World Vision Network.

This year, the national executive director of the Box Project, Sue Patneau, asked to accompany the group while they were



Toys arrive from Flora

in Mississippi. She flew in from the project headquarters in Florida to join them.

"Meeting the women from the Flora Christian Church was one of the highlights of my career," she said. "There is an unselfish spirit among them that's inspirational. They've been completely committed to the families they've supported. They believe that helping others has to come from the heart and they prove that by example."

She also was impressed by the efficiency of the women in their shopping.

"I learned that with a perfected shopping system, working in experienced teams, you can spend \$200 on food and necessities for a family in 10 minutes flat!" she said.

"Most families never meet their sponsors," she added. "The Box Project makes a long distance match, and we do not expect in-person meetings."

She said with the Flora women, the relationships they've developed in Mississippi are more like family than just a match relationship.

Nancy Hicks is the historian of the group. She takes pictures in Mississippi, and gives a slide presentation at the church and for other groups in early fall. This year she also showed highlights from the past 25 years.

Remembering is bittersweet for the women, because they've decided that this year's trip will be their last - as a group anyway. They've completed an era. Children in the Mississippi families have grown up. Some families no longer need help. Some recipients have died. For the ladies who have gone to Mississippi for so many years, the hard work of the trip is getting harder as they get older.

The church and women's group will continue to help support two families, and the Hicks family will continue as an individual sponsor.

Those who have gone to Mississippi say they have developed a close bond with each other.

Pat Helvie said those bonds as well as their friendships in Mississippi will not end just because they don't make the trip.

"It's part of our lives," she said.

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