



Jewish community helps deliver a merry Christmas

By **GARY KIRKLAND**
Sun staff writer

Published: Saturday, December 23, 2006 at 6:01 a.m.

Last Modified: Saturday, December 23, 2006 at 12:07 a.m.

Sunday at Highlands Presbyterian Church the Rev. Barry Ferguson will lead the Christmas Eve service, while in the church fellowship hall Rabbi Shaya Isenberg will be at work helping host the homeless families staying with the Interfaith Hospitality Network.

"Not in my fondest dreams, but it sounds very good," says the rabbi, when asked if he ever expected to be working on Christmas Eve in a Presbyterian church.

IHN is comprised of 11 host churches and 19 support congregations who open their buildings to house and feed homeless families. The host churches take turns, one week at a time, turning classrooms into rooms for the night, while the support congregations provide additional meals and volunteers.

The ancient Christmas story tells of a time when there was no room at the inn, so a child's birth took place in a stable. IHN Executive Director Donna Lawson says the challenge in Gainesville isn't finding room at the inn, it's finding inn keepers, since the churches need several volunteers to handle the many tasks.

"It's difficult, everyone leaves town for Christmas week," Lawson says.

And when she looks over the e-mail list that links the 130 other IHNs in cities across the country, the challenge of finding volunteers at Christmas time is a common thread. Last year, she says, the volunteer shortage meant the families needed to stay in motels for 10 days. But this year Lawson has it covered because the Jewish community in Gainesville has stepped up to fill the volunteer slots to make it happen.

"I think it's cool that the Jewish community is giving Christmas to the IHN families in a Christian church," Lawson says.

Ferguson, whose church was one of the founding members of IHN in Gainesville, was equally enthusiastic. He says on a typical hosting week it takes as many as 25 volunteers from his

congregation, which has fewer than 100 members.

"It was a most gracious and wonderful gift from our brothers and sisters in the Jewish community," Ferguson says.

Lawson expects three families to be staying the church,, 13 people total, including a set of 6-month-old twins and three teenagers.

Isenberg leads P'nai Or, a Jewish congregation that doesn't have its own building, but meets at the United Church of Gainesville, which is an IHN host church. When United Church of Gainesville (UCG) does its week of hosting, P'nai Or members serve a supporting role providing meals and volunteers.

"What we've gained for sure is a wonderful relationship with UCG, and it's phenomenal," Isenberg says.

Marilyn Eisenberg coordinates the volunteers for P'nai Or and says one goal has been to create a warm atmosphere for the guests, while the volunteers become like a family every two months when the hosting comes.

"Everybody has their specialty in terms of what they bring," Eisenberg says.

And Isenberg says helping out at Christmas, when Christians are celebrating their holiday, seemed like a natural.

"It's my understanding that we live in a world that we really need the cooperation of all the religions if we want to keep this planet livable," Isenberg says. "The need for collaboration is enormous. Nobody has the answers to everything."

And it's the kind of cooperation that Rabbi David Kaiman at Congregation B'nai Israel grew up with. He says he remembers going with his parents to help and volunteer at the Salvation Army shelter in Pensacola on Christmas Eve. Kaiman's congregation will also be helping with the effort.

"I think it's a beautiful way that the faith community can help each other," Kaiman says. "It shows what brings us together."

And the need is great, according to Lawson. The families in the network are waiting for openings in subsidized housing, she says. A couple of years ago that wait was about two months, now it can take six to eight months. Lawson says in the past year 750 to 1,000 volunteers have helped in the effort.

While Isenberg will be working as a Christmas Eve host and spending the night at the church, dinner for the evening will be coming from volunteers at the Lubavitch Jewish Center.

"I'd give the homeless food any day, it doesn't have to be Christmas," says Rabbi Berl Goldman. "It's a universal need and a universal principle to help each other."

And as a teacher Goldman says those who make the meal get a nice lesson.

"It's a message that will be with them for a long time," Goldman says.

Gary Kirkland can be reached at 338-3104 or kirklag@gvillesun.com.