Churches shift focus to 'Christmas stores' as a more uplifting way to give

By Manya A. Brachear
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When the doors of Bethel New Life opened last Saturday, Darlene Williams darted inside and headed straight for a table piled high with dolls, princess costumes and fairy tale castles. Toys had begun to spill out of her giant tote bag when she spotted a plain white box labeled MobiGo.

"My baby wanted this," she shrieked as she grabbed the electronic learning device and hugged it to her chest.

Raised in the foster care system, Williams was still learning how to be a mother when her daughter Kayla Gordon was born four years ago on Christmas Day. She began attending parenting classes at Bethel and eventually became a volunteer. That effort earned her an opportunity to shop at Bethel's annual Christmas store.

Though it's become a tradition for many households and congregations to fulfill a child's wish list for families who can't do it on their own, a growing number of ministries are replacing that charity model with what they believe can be a more uplifting approach. From Rogers Park to Garfield Park, ministries in Chicago have opened pop-up Christmas stores where families can afford to check off their child's list thanks to donated merchandise offered at drastically reduced prices, if not for free.

Though many Christians bemoan the retail industry's hold on the holidays, some ministries have found that enabling parents to put gifts under their own trees, in many cases, restores a sense of dignity that's often lost when families are in need.

"Everybody gets to work together to make something wonderful happen," Williams said as volunteers wrapped Christmas and birthday presents for her youngest daughter last weekend. "It helps me feel good about myself."

The shopping opportunity also pushes patrons to take steps toward improving their lives. At Bethel, a Lutheran ministry in Garfield Park, more than 700 families earned additional currency called Bethel Bucks by attending seminars on parenting, financial management and renters' rights.

"From a mission perspective for Bethel, the importance of people putting gifts under the tree is really about empowerment," said Lori R. Valvelunga, Bethel's president and CEO. "I can feel
good about myself as a provider for my family, learn about something else that helps me have better financial management for my family. … We really are working toward the same mission of investing in people who are coming in to invest in themselves."

The Christmas store concept emerged when author Bob Lupton, in a book titled "And You Call Yourself a Christian," pointed out the unintended consequences of toy drives and other adopt-a-child programs where families receive an annual dose of largesse from well-meaning affluent families.

While children's eyes fill with joy and wonder and mothers express gratitude when presents land on the doorstep, Lupton said he witnessed fathers disappearing into a back room, overcome by a sense of shame that they could not make their child as happy as strangers could.

"From our point of view, children need more than toys. They need effective parents," Lupton said.

That message resonated with Arloa Sutter, executive director of Breakthrough Ministries in East Garfield Park, one of the first ministries in Chicago to adopt the Christmas store approach.

"The residents in our neighborhood affected by poverty one way or the other don't want to be objects of charity," Sutter said. "They want to pick out what they want to give. They can always come up with a little cash. They feel they've gotten a good deal, and they're proud of themselves. They've been wise, and they've found things that their families and loved ones will like."

Sara Spoonheim senior director of external relations for Bethel, said she had witnessed an absence of fathers similar to what Lupton described. Only mothers showed up to pick up donated presents at Christmas. Now many men show up at the store to hand-pick toys, dolls and bicycles for their children.

"The dads get to be providers in this new approach, and they get to help choose gifts and help pay for them," Spoonheim said. "They get the pride that they're not receiving a handout."

Good News Partners, a community development organization in Rogers Park, converted its Christmas giving program into a store for the first time this year. Executive Director Ronn Frantz said some congregations chose to stick with the traditional direct-giving model. The same happened at Bethel before it established its Christmas store, Spoonheim said.

People simply preferred the personal connection with families, and some donors questioned the ethic of selling presents that had been donated, she said. But as congregations have seen the boost to clients' self-esteem, the number of church partners at Bethel has tripled, she said.
Melissa Browning, the graduate program director for the master's in social justice and community development for Loyola University Chicago's Institute of Pastoral Studies, said that in the spring, her students will look at which giving models are most effective.

Though Lupton, Spoonheim and others are convinced that the store approach is the way to go, the Loyola study will look at a particular holiday giving program offered by Catholic Charities and explore how donors and recipients in Chicago really feel.

"We want to look at the reasons people give at Christmas," Browning said. "Why do we prefer to actively go and do something tangible? Does that type of giving shape us morally? How do we make this life-giving so it doesn't feel like charity? These are some of the questions we're asking."

The Rev. Jeanne Stevens, co-pastor of Soul City Church in the West Loop, emphasizes that shopping is not the point of the church's Christmas store, even though the entire church has "turned into a Nordstrom or Bloomingdale's" for the last three years.

"We call it the Christmas store, but the focus is it's a community experience for the families at Brown and the families at our church," she said. Proceeds benefit Brown Elementary School. "The resources go back into benefiting their own children while they also have a wonderful experience on Christmas morning."

Before discovering Bethel's Christmas store, Ebony Luckett, 34, said she relied on dollar stores to provide presents for her four children — ages 15, 11, 10, 7 — at Christmas. But as her children have grown, so have their expectations. This year her teenage son wants an electric guitar. Her other children want electronic gadgets and video games.

"They know when momma gets able, she's going to get them everything they want," she said.

Luckett bought sports gear, toy cars and trucks, dolls, stuffed animals and a game the whole family can play together. The whole lot cost her only a dollar.

"All I had in my pocket at the time was $1.50," said Luckett, who paid for most of the presents with Bethel Bucks.

Luckett is counting her blessings. She will receive another benefit from Bethel's Christmas store.

More than half of the patrons at this year's store donated to a literacy program at Spencer Elementary School also supported by the store's proceeds. More than $14,000 will go toward the school where Luckett has volunteered and now has been hired to teach children to read.

"This year Christmas is going to be unforgettable," she said.