

Getting Started: Clothing Ministry: A Closet Full of Hope

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A group of retired women gather twice a week to sort donated clothing and share life as they work. A newly single mother living in a shelter picks out clothing for her family. A grandparent who is unexpectedly raising grandchildren can get all the clothes they need. A retired man drops off his gently used work boots to the donation bin in front of the church. A college sorority logs service hours helping set up a massive clothing giveaway. A community comes together to care for those in need. This is a snapshot of what happens regularly through Heritage Baptist Church's Hope Closet in Farmville, Virginia.

Matthew 25: 34-40 (NLT) says "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was. . . naked, and you gave me clothing. . . . Then these righteous ones will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you. . . naked and give you clothing? . . . And the King will say, 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it for me.'"

As the people of God, we are called to care for those in need and in Farmville, Virginia, Heritage Baptist Church is doing just that with its Hope Closet clothing ministry. What started in 2018 as a passion project of one woman to provide a small free boutique for women at Madeline's House shelter has become a major community ministry arm of the church and a service avenue for the community that serves the five surrounding counties. Much like the fishes and loaves of Luke 9, members at Heritage have been discovering that when you offer the little you have to Jesus in faith, he multiplies it to not only meet the existing need, but provides an overflow. "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20, NLT).

It all started in 2018 when Ann Simpson, a member at Heritage, heard from Berniece Hawkins—founder of Madeline's House, a shelter for survivors of domestic abuse—that many women were quite literally arriving at the shelter with only the clothes on their backs. Mothers needed work clothes. Children needed school clothes. Everyone needed shoes, coats, pajamas, and, well . . . everything.

Ann couldn't ignore the need, even though Heritage is a small congregation made up mostly of senior adults. Knowing her church couldn't meet the need alone, she reached out to her daughter's church in Chesapeake for donations of quality used clothing, particularly styles that would meet the needs of the younger clientele at Madeline's House. While waiting, Ann got permission from church leaders to turn an unused church office into a boutique-style space. A church member built clothing



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racks, shelves were re-purposed, and plastic storage bins were purchased. A yard sale of items donated by church members helped cover the start-up costs. By fall of that year, the Hope Closet had quietly opened—and served 12 families by Christmas. And before long, God began to multiply what had been offered.

Word of mouth began to spread, as it often does in small towns, and donations came in from people of all ages much faster than they were going out. It was clear that containing this to one office-sized boutique serving one shelter was too small a vision.

So in 2019, Ann began looking for other places and people in the community who would benefit from free clothing. She contacted social service agencies and non-profit organizations that worked with lower income households and let them know about this resource. She did a web search to locate government subsidized apartment complexes in the area. Recruiting a few men with trucks, she set up “pop up” clothing giveaways in the six communities. She contacted the organizers of “Christmas Mother,” that provided an opportunity for low income families to “shop” for Christmas gifts for children and clothing from the Hope Closet was made available there as well.

And when the pandemic hit in 2020, the Hope Closet didn’t slow down—it expanded. People were home, cleaning out closets, and donations overflowed. The church cultivated a “Giving Garden,” funded by a BGAV Hunger Grant, and hosted eight weekly vegetable and clothing giveaways, sharing fresh food and clothing with their community and putting the unused fellowship hall to good use as small groups shopped for new-to-them clothes. And in the fall of that year, utilizing church volunteers to do the big job of carrying and organizing all of those donations, Heritage hosted its first large-scale giveaway in the parking lot.

That year, 378 families “shopped” for clothes. In 2021, what became twice-annual giveaways moved back to the church fellowship hall and kept growing. By the fall of 2023, Ann finally admitted the day-to-day labor of this ministry had gotten larger than she could handle by herself, so she began recruiting regular helpers through announcements in worship and in the church bulletin. People caught the vision and the team now has seven “regulars” who spend two hours each Tuesday and Thursday sorting the roughly 20 garbage bags of donations that come in each week and welcoming those with specific needs who schedule appointments to come between large giveaways.

And the Closet kept growing. With 740 families served in 2023 and nearly 1,300 in 2024, valuable partnerships have also grown with others in the community. The local high school and PACE, a day program serving low-income senior adults, have started closets of their own, partially stocked with donations from the Hope Closet. Baby clothes are shared back and forth between the Closet and the Pregnancy Support Center as either group has needs. Local high school and college students get credit for service hours helping with giveaways. Social workers meet clients’ needs by picking up clothes. The court system lists the Hope Closet as a location where community service hours can be served. Parolees can make an appointment to get job interview clothes. Nursing homes offer residents clothing from the Closet as needed.

As donations have increased (especially after the local Goodwill closed in 2024), so has the Hope Closet. Two shipping containers, one funded by a grant from the Rotary Club and one donated by a benefactor, have been turned into climate-controlled storage for seasonal clothes. The original boutique is now a shoe room. Local Rotary and Lions Club members, college volunteers from Longwood and Hampden-Sydney, and a local bilingual



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hospital chaplain have begun working alongside Heritage Baptist Church members at each giveaway to make sure every neighbor feels welcome.

And Ann? She's still there, showing up each week, working alongside the growing team and expanding the mission with plans to send fliers about the giveaway to 10 additional schools this fall. "I had this vision when I was in my early 70s," she says. "No one is too old to make a difference. I think we forget that. [As James 4:2 says], 'We don't have because we don't ask God.'"

It's a reminder for all of us. Ministry doesn't always look like preaching or programs. Sometimes it looks like hangers and tables labeled by size and season. Sometimes it smells like warm clothes fresh from storage. Sometimes it starts with one person asking God, "What do You want me to do?"

If you feel the Holy Spirit nudging you to start something like this in your own community, you might be wondering about more specifics, like what it costs or how things are set up during sorting or for giveaways. If so, keep reading!

Start-up Expenses (in 2018):

- It cost about \$200 for a church member to build the clothing rods.
- In addition to the initial clothing donations, some clothes were purchased in end-of-season sales and at Goodwill stores to "fill in the gaps" on sizes that were still needed.
- Roughly \$400 was raised to cover these expenses by asking church members to donate unused items for a yard sale held in the church parking lot.

The typical annual budget:

- Has been between \$800-\$1500 per year as the ministry has grown. Items in the budget include:
 - Trash bags for storing sorted clothes and for distributing to shoppers at each giveaway (adults receive up to 3 bags each and teens get 1 bag each to fill as they shop)
 - Rubber bands to keep pairs of shoes together.
 - "Damp Rid" as an added layer of protection against damage from moisture where the clothes are stored.
 - Yard signs for around town to advertise each giveaway (signs are re-used but the dates have to be updated each time).
 - Storybooks for children and Bibles or other Christian literature for shoppers
 - Pizza and bottled water (and donated homemade cookies) for volunteers during the giveaways
 - Safety vests (one time purchase and re-used) for parking lot volunteers during giveaways

The grant-funded/donated used shipping containers that store clothing between giveaways cost approximately \$3500 each when obtained in the Spring of 2024 (6 years after the Hope Closet opened). The church provided an additional \$21,000 to have the containers delivered, to level the ground and extend the patio where the containers were placed, to add exterior wooden doors and ramps to the containers for ease of access, and to heat and cool them to control humidity and allow volunteers to work inside them year round.



The typical Hope Closet process from Donation to Giveaway

- In 2025, the church receives approximately 20 garbage bags full of clothes each week. Donors leave them in (and around) a large plastic bin that sits under the covered entryway near the main door of the church.
- Bags are brought in daily by church staff or volunteers and left in the Hope Closet work room.
- Each Tuesday and Thursday, volunteers set up tables with signs for each size, gender, and season and sort donations accordingly before placing sorted clothes into garbage bags with the same labels. Filled bags are moved by shopping or laundry cart to the shipping-turned-storage container for the appropriate season and stored until the next seasonal giveaway (one for spring/summer clothes and one for fall/winter clothes).

Six weeks before each giveaway:

- A volunteer contacts area school boards for permission to distribute fliers about the giveaway to local schools. Fliers are then printed (three to a sheet) and cut, grouped into batches of 20, and hand-delivered to administrators at each school for distribution.
- Local civic club and college representatives are contacted with a request for volunteers to assist with set up, execution, and take down for the giveaway (these “younger backs” are critical for an aging congregation to manage the physical labor involved).

Two to three weeks before giveaways:

- Belts, socks, shoes, and accessories are sorted.
- Dresses, suits, and coats are put on hangers.
- Church and community volunteers are contacted by telephone with specific assignments and times to arrive (see list of assignments under activities for the day of the giveaway below).
- People are recruited to make homemade cookies for volunteers to snack on during set up and the giveaway (this also allows church members who cannot be present for the giveaway or who are not physically able to assist in other ways to be part of the ministry)
- Church leaders are made aware of what spaces will be used and plans are made and communicated for where groups who normally use those spaces will meet during the week of the giveaway.

10 days before:

- Yard signs with giveaway location, times, and dates go up around the community (Note, keep written records of where these are placed so they can be collected and re-used after the giveaway)
- Email reminders are sent to social service agencies and posted on social media
- Fliers are distributed/posted on community bulletin boards around town, particularly in subsidized apartment complexes
- A Google form is created/updated for shoppers to register their name, address, phone number, and email address at the giveaway.

Week of the giveaway:

- Cards are printed with the web address and a QR code that takes shoppers to the prepared Google form (this allows the church to track which communities shoppers are coming from for future advertising and to invite shoppers to other events at the church. It also cuts down on people returning to take advantage of the free clothes to re-sell as there is implied accountability in taking their contact information)
- On Tuesday during the regular clothing ministry work time, extra people are invited as needed to set up tables and sorting signs in the giveaway area



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- **Wednesday evening:**
 - Adult and youth Bible studies are canceled, and participants assist with setting up the giveaway area
 - About an hour before other volunteers arrive, college students and youth are invited to carry labeled bags from storage to tables with matching labels (bags go under the tables).
 - Racks of hanging clothes and plastic bins of accessories are rolled or carried in from storage areas
 - Church and community volunteers take sorted clothing out of bags, fold, and pile as neatly as possible on labeled tables (leaving unopened bags under tables to restock as needed so early shoppers don't "clean out" an area). As stock has grown, at the next giveaway they will be further separating sizes into types (pants on one table, shirts on another).
 - A Welcome Table in a different space is set up with trash bags for shoppers to fill and paper for tracking numbers of shoppers as they enter the room
 - Colored tickets (like you might use for a raffle) are pre-counted in batches of different colors and ready to distribute to each person in line as they register (this lets the Welcome Team know they have registered and makes sure the fire marshal's maximum occupancy limits are not exceeded – when the color changes, the maximum number has been reached and a runner will need to find out how many people have exited the shopping space before letting new shoppers in)
- **Thursday** during regular clothing ministry work time (perhaps longer if needed): final "tweaks" and preparation for shoppers is completed.
- **Friday (Day 1 of the giveaway)**
 - Set up a prayer tent/table at the exit door (staffed by at least 2 people)
 - Set up a literature table near the exit with Bibles in English and Spanish (or whatever languages are prominent in your community), devotionals, and children's books.
 - Ask volunteers to arrive about 45 minutes before the doors open to shoppers for any last minute instructions and to get to their stations.
 - Deploy volunteers in the following places (or whatever makes sense for your space). When possible, put at least two people in each location so one can take breaks or jump up to assist with carrying heavy loads, etc. and the station stays staffed:
 - 2 people at the prayer tent/table
 - 2 people at the literature table
 - 2-3 people at the welcome table to hand out bags, take tickets distributed by registration volunteers, and direct people to the shopping area(s), bathrooms, etc.
 - 2-6 people with smart phones or tablet computers helping shoppers register (at least one of these would ideally speak any foreign language your guests are likely to speak).
 - 2-6 people directing traffic and telling people where to enter
 - 2-3 levelheaded people who are ready to de-escalate a situation if tempers flare while waiting in line or shopping (and make sure all volunteers know who to call if they are needed)
 - The rest of the volunteers work "on the floor" in the clothing area helping people find sizes and styles that they like, assisting those with children who might need an extra pair of hands, refolding clothes as needed, restocking tables from the bags underneath as needed, and helping shoppers carry their bags out to their vehicles.
 - Throughout the process, volunteers are engaging in friendly conversations with shoppers to help them feel welcome and have a good experience and engaging in spiritual conversations with those who are open to it as well



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- At the end of the evening, tables and hanging racks are restocked as much as possible, clothing on tables is neatly (re)organized, and the Welcome and Literature Tables are re-stocked as needed to be prepared for Saturday morning shoppers.
- Volunteers are offered pizza and homemade cookies (or whatever suits your group). They've worked hard through dinner time and most don't want to go home and cook.
- **Saturday morning (Day 2 of the giveaway)**
 - Volunteers are asked to arrive about 30 minutes before the doors open to shoppers to receive any last minute instructions and be in place when the doors open for shoppers.
 - The process for Saturday morning is identical to Friday night's.
 - After the shopping doors close at the end and if volunteers are willing to stay, leftover clothing is returned to labeled bags and moved back into storage or to a designated space for things that will be thrown away or passed along to another non-profit. Tables are returned to their original locations and hanging racks and storage bins are put away.
 - Needed rooms are re-set to their normal Sunday morning configuration or alternate plans are communicated to those who use those spaces.
 - Any leftover food from the night before is offered to volunteers while they work.
- **Sunday morning (after the giveaway)**
 - A brief report is shared in the worship service about the giveaway along with a story or two about meaningful moments if it's appropriate (protecting the confidentiality of people who may not want everyone present or watching the online service to know they needed free clothing). This is a great time to recruit new volunteers and to remind the church that all the time, energy, and investment of funds and space are worth it to care well for the community.
 - If volunteers did not finish putting everything away and setting the room(s) back up on Saturday, members of the congregation are invited to help finish putting things away after the worship service.

Things learned that may help you:

- Use wire or other thin hangers rather than the tubular plastic ones to get more clothing on each hanging rack
- Count Bibles, books, etc. when you set them up and then count them after the giveaway to determine how many were given away.
- More shoppers come for fall/winter clothes than for summer clothes
- Fall/Winter clothes are bulkier than spring/summer clothes. Consider giving an extra bag to shoppers in the fall giveaway.
- If you use QR codes and online forms for shopper registration, have plenty of fliers/cards with the QR code to hand out to those who know how to use them and have plenty of volunteers ready to assist those who didn't bring a smartphone or who find the registration process complicated.
- Try to have volunteers who can translate into whatever languages you expect shoppers to speak so they feel welcome. If this is not possible, there are some good translator apps you can use from a smartphone. School aged children of non-English speakers are also often bi-lingual and can translate in a pinch.
- Registration volunteers can help people in line early register before the doors open to the shopping area so as many people as is reasonable for the space can enter when the doors open.
- Two hours on Friday evening and one hour on Saturday morning has been enough time to accommodate a giveaway with 650 shoppers in a mid-sized fellowship hall. The bulk of shoppers will come on Friday evening, but offering a second opportunity on a different day and time allows those who work on Friday evening a chance to participate. It also gives an opportunity for those who hear from friends or neighbors who shopped on Friday a chance to come the next day.
- Have your volunteers wear nametags so shoppers know who to ask for help.



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- Have a plan for how to handle people who get angry or frustrated with long lines or because someone else picked up an item they wanted.
- Never receive those who come by appointment alone. Always have two people to meet them for everyone's safety.
- Realize that your church staff all have other priorities, so fill as many needed roles by volunteers as possible (though utilizing staff as greeters and registration volunteers at the giveaway is a good way for them to connect with the community too)
- Every time you do this, take notes during the process and have a debriefing session with key volunteers afterwards to note what went well and what can be improved for the next giveaway.

Things to Think About

- This ministry takes a lot of space, so have a plan for where donations will be stored, sorted, and disbursed.
- Have a follow-up plan so you can continue to minister to those who may not be connected with other churches or who might be interested in other community events your church offers (Vacation Bible Schools, Wednesday evening programs, Easter Egg Hunts, Fall Festivals, etc.)
- This is a physically demanding ministry as clothing has to be moved from donation bins/locations to the sorting area to the storage area(s) to the giveaway area(s). Recruit help accordingly. Use wheels whenever possible. Don't be afraid to ask others for help when you need it (you don't want an injury from lifting incorrectly or lifting too much weight).
- Be prepared for some in your congregation to be frustrated by the space required or by the number of "strangers" this kind of ministry brings into the building and be prepared to share storage plans for clothing and safety plans for people.
- Because of the storage space required, you may get suggestions to hold giveaways more frequently as the ministry grows. Keep in mind the physical labor and the numbers of volunteers needed before adding additional giveaways. People who want to help but have different passions have a limit to how often they will serve.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help and make connections with other community resources. As a ministry like this grows, it can truly become a community-wide endeavor. Think outside the (church) box about partnerships:
 - Other churches
 - Social service agencies (government and non-profits) who serve under-resourced people
 - Housing areas for low-income households
 - Public and Private schools (for advertising, places to donate to, and for volunteers – especially honor societies and clubs that require service hours)
 - Local colleges that have offices that connect students with volunteer opportunities and college sororities and fraternities looking for a cause to support (students enjoy shopping for free as well)
 - Local civic clubs (for donations and volunteer support)
 - Places that serve senior adults (day programs, assisted living and nursing homes) both their clients and their workers can often make use of the clothing you offer
 - The court system that helps those with minor offenses find community service locations can list your clothing ministry as an option
 - The prison system and half-way houses for those who need clothes for job interviews or work after release
 - Organizations that help provide Christmas gifts for children
 - Pregnancy Support Centers
 - Scout troops are often looking for community service projects

If you are interested in learning more from someone actively engaged in this ministry, contact Ann Simpson at 444ann@gmail.com.

