

Ministry Uses Shoes to Spread Hope, Gospel

✖ A Nigeria-born Pentecostal minister who received his first pair of shoes at age 9 is on a mission to distribute 10 million pairs of shoes to impoverished children worldwide.

Through his Charlotte, Samaritan's Feet, Manny Ohonme has distributed nearly 1 million pairs of shoes in more than 40 nations through donations from companies such as Nike, Adidas and Crocs. In February, Kmart donated 1 million pairs of its Protégé collection, created by New York Knicks player Al Harrington, to the ministry.

On Tuesday, the Detroit Pistons teamed up with Samaritan's Feet to give away 1,000 pairs of new shoes and socks to area children in need. The entire team was on hand for the outreach, which is part of the NBA Cares "Week of Service," where teams give a day of community service.

"Basic needs are an integral part of the Pistons Care mission during these tough economic times," said Dennis Sampier, director of community relations/Pistons-Palace Foundation. "Partnering with Samaritan's Feet falls right in line with our efforts and allows ... Detroit area children to receive a new pair of shoes and socks."

Although many Samaritan's Feet supporters are not Christian organizations, Ohonme says giving away shoes is a tangible way to present the love of Christ. At each shoe giveaway, volunteers wash the recipients' feet and anoint them with oil in an act of both humility and service, Ohonme says.

"We ask them their name, we ask them what their dreams are," said Ohonme, who is ordained through the Assemblies of God. "We ask them, 'What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you?' And we tell them, 'Do you know that we know the Person who can help heal your past and has the key to unlock your future?' And we get the chance to minister to those kids."

In Burundi last August, when Samaritan's Feet gave away 10,000 pairs of shoes, the nation's president, Pierre Nkurunziza, kneeled down and washed children's feet and gave them new pairs of shoes. Earlier this year, Ohonme said San Bernardino, Calif., Mayor Patrick J. Morris joined Samaritan's Feet in washing the feet of homeless residents and distributing shoes.

Ohonme says a simple pair of shoes changed his own life. At age 9, he received his first pair from a missionary in his native Nigeria. He then started playing basketball with the sneakers and earned a spot on his high school team. After graduating high school, he was offered a scholarship to play basketball at the University of North Dakota, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees.

"I believe words are powerful," Ohonme said. "And words mixed with God's anointing can light up such hope. The guy that gave me a pair of shoes, all he told me was to dream."

After launching a successful career as an executive in a software company, Ohonme said he sensed God leading him to start a ministry that would provide shoes for those in need when he visited Africa in 1997. He and his wife founded Samaritan's Feet in 2003, but he said the ministry's first four years were fraught with difficulty and sacrifice. Shoe donations trickled in, only to be stored in the Ohonmes' home and garage.

"God humbled us to the point we wondered: *Where in the world are you God? We said yes. What in the world is going on?*" he

said.

But 2007 marked a turning point. That year he and a ministry partner decided to ask Ron Hunter, coach of the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis basketball team, to coach a game where the teams played without shoes to raise 40,000 pairs of shoes for impoverished children.

Hunter agreed, and the January 2008 game, broadcast nationally on ESPN, generated 110,000 pairs of shoes. That led to interviews on ABC News and a Mother's Day appearance on *Inside the NBA*, where hosts Ernie Johnson, Charles Barkley and Kenny Smith went barefoot during the broadcast. Some 20,000 shoes were donated along with \$30,000 to help with shipping costs.

Since then, warehouses have been donated in Charlotte, San Bernardino and Indianapolis, where some 600,000 pairs of shoes are waiting to be shipped around the world. This year, the ministry is to distribute 100,000 pairs in South Africa and another 100,000 in Burundi.

Ohonme said groups large and small—including Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, and Mothers of Preschoolers groups—are collecting shoes to give away, though money for shipping costs is quickly becoming a greater need. Recently, Samaritan's Feet developed a system for supporters to make donations by texting the word "shoes" to 85944 at a cost of \$5 per text.

Ohonme, who is filming the pilot of a forthcoming reality show during the Pistons outreach Tuesday, said the ministry ultimately is not about shoes.

"The shoes is just a hook, just the bait," he said. "Because those shoes will wear out. There is a [spiritual] transaction that happens ... that we hope those kids will never forget. And that's what this stuff is about."