

A 'Courageous' Plan to Reach Albany, Ga.

Dull, gray Spanish moss dangles from the oak trees that line the street Sherwood Baptist Church is located on. Perhaps it's a symbol of the economic gloom that consumes many who live in Albany, Ga., and in countless other communities across the U.S.

Pecan sheds, "mom and pop" stores and rusty gas stations give the city a small town feel. But the boarded windows and abandoned buildings on several corners reveal a deeper reality.

Albany is ranked as the fourth poorest city in America, according to . A surge of layoffs in recent years has left 10.6 percent of residents unemployed and nearly 12 percent living below the poverty line.

And with those dismal economic numbers comes dismayed residents. Many in the area do not go to church regularly, even though there are 48 Southern Baptist churches in the three counties that surround the city.

Sherwood's Senior Pastor Michael Catt understands that reality, and it's what drives him as he makes plans to get involved in *My Hope with Billy Graham*.

"Eighty-eight percent of this [area] is lost and unchurched," Catt said. "We're obviously failing at reaching our region."

On Feb. 5, dozens of pastors and other church leaders met at Sherwood—which is best known for its production of the faith-based films *Courageous*, *Fireproof*, *Facing the Giants* and *Flywheel*—to learn about training their members to share their faith in an area that's yearning for a Savior.

My Hope is a nationwide evangelism project the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has held in other countries. Now it's America's turn. Like the disciple Matthew—who invited his friends over to meet Jesus in the New Testament—*My Hope* “Matthews” are asked to invite their friends, neighbors and others into their homes to watch a culturally relevant program that features a gospel message by Graham.

“For the person that says, ‘I’m scared to go knock on the door and tell somebody about Christ,’ it’s doing it for them in a sense and giving them the opportunity to be the gracious host that invites people into their home,” Catt said. “So much of Jesus’ ministry was in the home.

“He would go and heal people in the home. He would have dinner in the home. Sinners would gather in that home to listen to Him.”

Catt has cleared his fall schedule to focus solely on *My Hope*, which culminates on the week of Billy Graham’s 95th birthday, which is Nov. 7.

In addition to implementing free *My Hope* resources, Catt plans to hold workshops at the church and preach on the importance of sharing Christ with others.

“We have realized we need to do a better job of equipping our lay people to feel comfortable talking about their faith,” Catt said. “They should, but they don’t.”

Winning Neighbors

After signing up for *My Hope*, each participant makes a list of individuals they’d like to pray for who don’t know Christ personally.

Catt already has a few people in mind—an entire neighborhood, in fact.

The Gillespie area is less than five miles from Sherwood. Not

only is it the poorest part of Albany, but Catt notes that it's an overwhelmingly unchurched area.

"We'll probably go door to door and invite them to come and we'll share the gospel," Catt said.

In the Gillespie neighborhood also sits a former Coca-Cola bottling plant that was donated to Sherwood in 2010. The 60,000-square-foot building is old and will need to be renovated, but Catt sees the potential, especially for use with *My Hope*.

"We're looking at how we can set up a room [in the plant], maybe put 150 to 200 people in there, which is a little beyond what *My Hope* [calls for]," he said. "But some of these people might not get it, they might not have a TV [to watch the Billy Graham program]."

An Encounter With Billy Graham

Joining in with *My Hope* brings Catt's connection to the ministry full circle. In college, he attended the Billy Graham School of Evangelism. While at the 1975 Jackson, Miss., Crusade, Catt came face to face with the man he'd only admired on television.

"I'd heard E.V. Hill preach just before lunch. I was in college and had no money to go eat, so I just stayed in the church," Catt recalled. "I went and stood behind the pulpit ... and in a matter of two minutes, George Beverly Shea, Cliff Barrows and Billy Graham walked through the door."

"It was me, a college friend and the three of them and that was it in the room for about 8 to 10 minutes," Catt said.

He came away from that encounter with a signed Bible from Mr. Graham and Mr. Barrows (Mr. Shea had to leave the meeting early).

"I don't know that we'll ever see another million people at a

Crusade [like Billy Graham attracted],” Catt said thoughtfully.

“With changing laws and changing cultures and closed doors, how do we get inside those doors?” he added, assessing the need for *My Hope*. “To me, it’s a no-brainer. [We] can use a tool like this to get into the homes of our neighbors ... people that we should be building relationships with anyway.”

More Than Movies

As a white pastor in a town that’s 70 percent African-American, Catt is hoping *My Hope* will help him bridge the racial gap he and others have been trying to mend.

“Because that’s the only way this town is going to change,” Catt said. “The only way we’re going to have effective evangelism is if it’s not selective on whose door I’m going to go knock on.”

Catt also sees *My Hope* as a way to get the church moving again, including his own.

“The role of the pastor is to remind everybody why we’re here. And I’ve had to say to the church, ‘Let’s not let our movies do our evangelism for us,’” Catt shared.

“It’s wrong to transport the Gospel around the world with our movies and not do anything in our ‘Jerusalem,’ he added. “We’ve got to do it here.”