

Single Parent Car Care Clinic

In the fall of 2001, Grace Community Church held its first car care clinic for single parents. The original vision included single parents bringing their cars, getting a lube and oil change, a diagnostic inspection from a professional mechanic, and perhaps some minor repairs performed - all for free. While they were waiting, a hospitality area would be provided for them and their children.

As with most ventures, we learned a lot that first time, including the following: based on the response, we were going to need more volunteers - in every area; there needed to be more delegation to the volunteers from those who conceived the idea; and the church's parking lot was not the best place to hold the event.

But the first time was also a huge success. There were 18 single parents who registered prior to the clinic, but 30 showed up to have their cars worked on. Not only were they particularly grateful, all of the volunteers had a great time and were ready to do it again.

Since that time, we have held two clinics per year. What follows is a brief rundown of what the clinic has become:

Why

While servicing the cars of single parents is our methodology, our primary purpose is to serve them, and to communicate to them that they matter - to God, to our church, that *they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect*. Working on their cars is one specific way we communicate those truths.

Who

We have made the determination to service those single parents who have dependent children living with them. This includes single grandparents who are raising grandchildren. As of late, we have opened this up somewhat to elderly widows of limited means. (The directors of the seniors ministry at our church help us pre-qualify these applicants.) We have also serviced some parents who technically are not single, but whose spouse is incarcerated.

When

The event is always held on a Saturday morning from 8:00-11:30am.

Where

Our first clinic was in the church parking lot, the next two were in professional garages, graciously hosted by the garage owners. Starting with the fourth clinic, they have been held on the property of the church's thrift store. The back part of the property used to be a trailer park, and there are still 16 full-length trailer cement slabs (8'x40'). This is ideal for a variety of reasons. Two cars can be placed on any one slab at a time, letting us work on 32 cars at any given moment. There is ample room for the hospitality area and other services, and since the church owns the property, that gives us great freedom and flexibility in both scheduling the event and use of the property.

What - Actually Happens At The Clinic

A. Auto Service

Since its inception, the focus of the clinic is to serve single parents with regards to their automotive needs. The basic services have not changed - they receive an oil change, diagnostic inspection from a professional mechanic, and some repairs - all for free. Once their car is done, we check the air in their tires, including the spare, and wash their car.

B. Registration

Each single parent registers their car and signs a release. (We use three-part ncr forms.) **We do not allow people to bring in other people's cars, and no car gets worked on until the owner signs the release portion of the registration form/work order.** (All volunteers are also required to sign a release.)

At registration, each single parent is given a piece of paper with a number on it to be placed in their car, as they are called in order. We do not take reservations, but take them on a first come-first served basis. They do not need to call in advance, but all of our invitation materials make it clear that we give preference to those who have called ahead. Then on the name tag they are given, we write that same number so they can remember what it is. At this point they are also given an information packet from the church which includes a list of shops and mechanics they can go to for further auto needs.

C. Hospitality

While waiting to get their car worked on, and/or while waiting while their car is being worked on, we wanted to provide the single parents with a place to wait and have some refreshments. Several of the ladies from our church have made this a huge part of the success of the clinic. Between donations and purchasing various items, we provide an ample supply and variety of goodies for the single parents and their children - coffee, juice, cookies, baked goods, donuts, cheese and crackers, fruit, chips, vegetable platters and more. Like everything else, it is all free to them while they wait.

We also have volunteers who serve solely in the area of childcare. We provide crafts, making cardboard forts, and other diversions to keep children occupied, and erect a physical barrier to keep them from the car area as best we

can. And since our location is next door to a fire station, a fire fighter from our church arranges to take kids on tours of the fire station throughout the event.

We provide a voucher for the thrift store so they can shop while they wait. In the past we had provided various non-perishable items (through donations) for them, but have discontinued that service. However, through a connection with a local bakery, we procure hundreds of loaves of bread, rolls, buns, etc. for them to take home.

In addition, hospitality workers make regular rounds of the volunteers offering drinks and snacks.

D. Table Hostesses

One of the more intentional ministry aspects of the clinic involves table hostesses. Table hostesses are women (or older couples) from our church whose role is simply to visit with the single parents that come. Our hope is that many of them have been invited by people in our church, and as such they may not know anyone else at the clinic. The hostesses visit with them, listen, pray with them, and simply befriend them while they wait. This is a completely separate role from others in the hospitality area who are in charge of the refreshments. Many of the single parents feel that the church has already judged them, so befriending them, letting them talk - about whatever, and just sitting with them can be a tremendous outreach to them. We have had some instances where people have trusted Christ for the first time, either at the clinics, or later on because of relationships formed at the clinic.

E. What Actually Happens To The Cars

The cement slabs where we work on the cars are designated as 'bays', which are divided up into five groups of 3-4 bays each. Each bay has 2-3 volunteer mechanics. A professional mechanic is assigned to oversee groups of 3-4 bays. To speed things up, we put two cars on a slab, nose to nose. When a car pulls onto the slab, the volunteer mechanics talk to the owner and note their concerns on the work order. The owner then goes to the hospitality area. The volunteers jack up the front end of the car, pull off one of the front tires, and begin to change the oil. They also note anything they see for the professional mechanic and begin to top off other fluid levels, etc.

Then the professional mechanic will inspect the brakes and make a general inspection of the car. Any parts that are determined to be needed are relayed to the parts caller and a runner is dispatched for the parts (see G). Once they arrive, the volunteers do the repairs and are overseen by the professional, who inspects their work.

If new brakes are put on, the professional mechanic takes the car for a short test drive to check the brakes.

Once all the repairs are completed, the 'exit person' for that group of bays is summoned, and he goes and gets the owner. The owner goes over what repairs were done and what may still be needed that we can't do. Then one of the volunteer mechanics drives the car to the inflation station (see I), where the owner stays with the car through the end of the station and/or the car wash.

F. Who Gets What

Cars come in with a variety of mechanical needs (some cars have been towed in). Some repairs simply can't be done within the constraints of not working in a fully equipped shop, and not being able to work on any one car for several hours. The three criteria the clinic director uses to determine which repairs are made are: time - safety - expense.

Occasionally we will buy the part for them and tell them what needs to be done if we cannot do it there, and then they can have it done at a later time by a shop or volunteers.

G. Parts

One of the biggest challenges to overcome was how to get parts for the cars in a timely manner - from diagnosis of what's needed to installation. Our current two-pronged approach is working pretty well. The first part is to pre-buy as many parts as possible. When the single parents call ahead to let us know they're coming, we have a volunteer who goes to the parts store and pulls an oil filter and air filter for their car. The parts are bagged and the owner's name and car information written on the bag. Then when they show up, these parts are placed in their car so when their car pulls in to be worked on, those basic parts are already there. If the owner knows of other problems (bad brakes, etc.) these parts are also pulled ahead of time.

The second part of the process deals with those parts that we determine on the spot that are needed. Assuming we get enough volunteers, each of the five groups of bays is assigned a parts caller and at least two parts runners.

We have arrangements with different auto parts stores/chains that are in close proximity to the clinic. When a part is needed, the caller gets all the information, locates the part, and sends a runner. All of the parts stores have an account for us and then bill us. On rare occasions we have to go to a dealership for a part, but most of the time we do not.

H. Tires

As time went by, one of our ongoing frustrations was our inability to do much with one of the more common problems single parents face in terms of their automobile needs - tires. It was obvious in so many cases that they needed new tires, but short of giving them money for the tires, we had no good method of meeting that need.

Recently we were put in touch (divinely) with the manager of a tire shop for a multi-state tire chain. He now comes to every clinic and inspects the tires of each car. If he determines the owner needs new tires, one of two things happens. After consulting with the director of the clinic, he either makes arrangements at one of their shops for tires that the church will pay for, or he offers the single parent a deal on behalf of the tire chain, and the single parent decides if they want to take advantage of it. He evaluates the driving habits of the owner and recommends suitable replacements, at a very reduced rate. As an example, at a recent clinic, our church bought 13 tires for six different car owners at three different locations of his company, and the total bill was less than \$550, including balancing, mounting, road-hazard certificate etc. This has been a great blessing and tremendous addition

of a service for the single parents.

I. Inflation Station

One group of volunteers runs the 'inflation station'. This is the last mechanical check before the optional car wash. This stop is not optional. At the inflation station, all the tires are checked for correct air pressure, the oil dipstick is double-checked to make sure there is oil in the car, and the oil drain plug is double-checked. A sticker is affixed to the windshield, just like at a professional oil change shop showing mileage, date, etc.

J. Ministry

The ministry of the car care clinic is multi-faceted. We want to help single parents with their cars, make them aware of our church and what it can offer them, make them aware of the thrift store, listen to them, pray with them. Several of the volunteer and professional mechanics feel comfortable enough to pray with them about their needs. One of our main desires is that we treat them with dignity and respect, and let them know they matter. In the past, some of those attending have made a first-time decision for Christ at the clinic.

The other ministry aspect is to the volunteers. For many of the guys, this is one of the few places they can do 'guy stuff' for the Lord. Some that come regularly to work on cars do not attend our church, some are not even believers. It's a great way for inter-generational ministry as fathers and sons work together, adult sons and fathers, and whole families, and put people of different age groups together to work in various areas of the clinic. We have had three generations in the same family volunteer together.

Several of the single parents from our church not only bring their cars, but also volunteer to serve other single parents.

Miscellaneous

A. Finances

For the first few years, the clinic was a line item in our church's budget. The last couple of years it has ceased to be a budget item and is paid for out of our benevolence fund. Several members of the church donate funds for the event, businesses donate goods and services, and we continue to pursue corporate sponsorship, from which we have secured some significant funding to date. Most of the time we have the clinics, lunch is provided for the volunteers from a local restaurant who donates all the food and paper goods for lunch. All of the parts stores we use give us discounts, some significant reductions (jobber cost).

B. Oil

One of the challenges is oil disposal and clean-up. Oil spills are inevitable, which is one reason the church parking lot wasn't the best place to do this. In our situation, we have some 55-gallon drums that we use for fluid collection. It's divided into two categories, oil/transmission fluid and coolant. Oil and transmission fluid can be mixed, but not coolant. Then after the clinic, we have a service come suck out the fluids and dispose of them and store the empty drums until next time.

C. Volunteers

Here is a list of the types of positions we recruit volunteers for:

- Registration
- Traffic Directors
- Someone to keep cars moving into open spots
- Parts callers
- Parts runners
- Car washers
- Set-up people
- People to tear down tables and chairs
- Hospitality
- Child care/crafts
- Hostesses
- Inflation station
- Volunteer mechanics
- Professional mechanics
- Tire inspection
- Exit people
- Supplies person

D. Final Notes:

Two final notes: The first one is safety! By God's grace we have never had an accident. In addition to making this a big deal with all of the volunteers, we also limit kids around the cars. We do not allow volunteers under the age of 13 to help work on cars, unless they are working directly with their parent. Also, as noted, we endeavor to keep the children of the single parents away from the work area.

Secondly, you can not do too much double-checking. We double and triple-check the oil levels, the tightness of the oil drain plug, and lug nuts if wheels have been taken off.