

# THE STATE Local / Metro

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## ‘Hungry to do something bigger than themselves’

Columbia church, United Way join forces to preach a gospel of volunteer service



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LaToya Weston, left, volunteers her time through United Way helping Midlands residents receive free tax preparation and filing at the State Credit Union building on Huger Street. Bible Way Church of Atlas Road and United Way of the Midlands will announce a unique collaboration designed to promote the importance of volunteer service.

When Bible Way Church of Atlas Road senior pastor **Darrell Jackson Sr.** challenged his congregation to devote more time to volunteer service, he urged them to put their hearts to work and leave their Bibles behind.

*“We decided pretty clearly that we were talking about the services outside of the doors of the church,”* Jackson said.

As a result, the southeast Columbia congregation has embarked on a crusade, hoping to spark a renewed movement of service throughout the area.

More than 2,000 Bible Way members have committed to volunteering 80 hours each in 2008 as part of the church’s Year of Renewed Commitment, an effort aimed at promoting the importance of volunteer service.

*“People are hungry to do something bigger than themselves. But many people have never been challenged to do that,”* Jackson said.

That thinking was the driving force behind the effort between the church and United Way of the Midlands.

*“The support has really just been surprising and overwhelming,”* Jackson said, regarding the number of commitments — totaling 160,000 volunteer hours — received from church members within 30 days of his challenge late last year. *“One of the things that we wanted to do was make it bigger than the church.”*

To help ensure that happened, the church sought help from United Way to identify nonprofit and community-service agencies in need of volunteers. The United Way’s Volunteer Center agreed to partner with the church’s volunteer office to schedule and record volunteer hours while also working with the various agencies to accommodate the large number of volunteers.

*“We talk about stewardship. We talk in terms of financial recourses, time and talents. For the first time, we’ve kind of seen someone put that out there in a substantive way,”* United Way volunteer center manager **Eric Roberts** said.

Since January, church members have donated their services to such organized efforts as Home Works and the Salvation Army, while also taking on less formal projects like neighborhood cleanups.

Roberts said the thousands of hours Bible Way members are expected to serve this year are valued at just more than \$3 million, on the basis of the \$18.77-an-hour rate the U.S. Department of Labor has assigned to volunteer work.

Most of the work is being completed in stretches of four to five hours or less.

*“What they are looking for is a consistent place to look for volunteer opportunities,”* Roberts said, adding that involves both short- and long-term opportunities.

Jackson said he is encouraged by the early response from his congregation.

*“I’ve never seen so much excitement about just reaching out to the community,”* he said.

United Way president and CEO **Mac Bennett** said he hopes the Bible Way campaign will spark similar efforts by other organizations and individuals.

*“This says to me that 2,000 very diverse members of a church say they can do it,”* Bennett said. *“A lot of other people can do it, too.”*

While the initiative officially ends in December, Jackson expects the patterns of service that are established during the year to continue.

*“We’ve already had people ask us, ‘Can we do this again next year?’ I tell them, ‘You can do this every year.’”*



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