

# Christ Health Center Church/ Clinic Partnership in Birmingham

*Authentic Healthcare for  
Body, Mind and Spirit*

*By Ramsey Duck*



**I**t is one thing to tell a young girl that she is pregnant, that God loves her, loves her baby, and that life is precious and sacred. It is something altogether different to drop everything you are doing on the basis of a single phone call, to take the mother across town for an ultrasound, to commit to walk out the next five months of her pregnancy with her, to voluntarily enter into the world of a complete stranger, to embrace her with open arms and to engage in an authentic relationship with her and the life growing inside her. That all-consuming approach to loving people into Christ's kingdom is the trademark of what Christ Health Center and Church of the Highlands is doing in Birmingham, Alabama's Woodlawn neighborhood.

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Christ Health Center is in the midst of a considerable growth spurt. This time last year, the organization employed one family practice physician, a medical assistant, and a part time bookkeeper who worked together to operate two exam rooms on the campus of The Foundry Rescue Mission in Bessemer, Alabama. That skeleton staff, in its cramped quarters, saw approximately 3,500 patient visits per year, charging a meager \$25 to see the doctor.

Today, Christ Health Center operates two facilities and employs two family practice physicians, a dentist, a nurse practitioner, three medical assistants, three administrative staff and a growing corps of committed volunteers. It has an active partnership with Samford University's McWhorter School of Pharmacy, the University of Alabama's School of Dentistry, Truth In Love Ministries, The Dispensary of Hope, and Church of the Highlands. Out of all of these relationships, it is the connection to Church of the Highlands that has had the greatest impact on Christ Health Center's story.

In November of 2007, the leadership of Christ Health Center found itself at a crossroads. The Jefferson County Department of Public Health announced that it was closing its Eastern Health

Center, a facility that had served the residents of the Woodlawn neighborhood for over 50 years. While the building was dated, and the county complained that it had outgrown the 16,600 square foot site, there was clear potential in the established community health resource.

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Dr. Robert Record, founder of Christ Health Center, Dr. John Fischer, who was busily operating the Bessemer facility, and Dr. Barney Sims, a long time mentor and friend to the ministry, saw the tremendous opportunity to expand the scope of their efforts. After a period of prayer and fasting, they each committed to mortgage their homes in an attempt to raise the funds for the impending auction of the building.

Before submitting a bid, Dr. Record approached Chris Hodges, his pastor at Church of the Highlands, to seek his counsel and covering in this major life and ministry decision. As he shared his vision for community-based, Christ-centered, comprehensive healthcare in one of Birmingham's most desperate and marginalized neighborhoods, he struck a chord in Pastor Chris' heart. Both men had a burning passion to see the Church reclaim its rightful role in pouring out unprecedented levels of compassion to the poor, the sick, the hungry, the hurting and the desperate neighbors who shared their city.

Pastor Chris' only question was, "How much?" How much would it cost to acquire and renovate the building. Though Dr. Record protested and

assured his pastor that this was not a plea for capital, he eventually relented and hypothesized that the project would require a \$500,000 investment.

Through its careful and consistent stewardship, with cash already on hand, Church of the Highlands was able to acquire not only the health center, but an adjacent, abandoned firehouse that, despite its standing on the National Historic Register, had fallen into serious disrepair. Together, the two facilities would comprise the campus of The Birmingham Dream Center, and would become the nerve center for Church of the Highlands' community development and re-neighborhooding efforts in the Woodlawn community.

The community development efforts were divided into five principle categories: Education, Recreation, Healthcare, Housing, and Economic Development. Undeterred by ongoing renovations on approximately 80 percent of the building, and ready to tackle the healthcare needs of the community, Christ Health Center opened its doors to the public on March 23rd.

Since that time, Dr. Record and nurse practitioner, Amelia Morton have seen roughly 800 individual patients. Christ Health Center accepts all forms of insurance, including Medicaid and Medicare, and treats uninsured patients on a generous sliding



scale. From the earliest of those 800 plus patients, the healthcare team saw a need for structured counseling, a committed intervention that would point people to the love and mercy of Christ while working to reverse lifetimes of abuse, poor decisions, and poverty.

Enter Truth In Love Ministries. Dr. Mark Shaw founded Truth In Love with the idea of merging counseling and psychology with biblical discipleship. Their model incorporates two-person teams of lay counselors who address issues ranging from addiction to infidelity in a method that always brings people back to the truth of scripture and encourages the client to conform to biblical truth over worldly solutions. Truth In Love, and their team of volunteer counselors, are now on site during all hours of operation and provide a ready resource for the busy healthcare providers to connect hurting patients to God's love.

More than just caring for patients, Christ Health Center also serves as a living laboratory for future generations of healthcare professionals. Partnerships with Samford University's McWhorter School of Pharmacy and the University of Alabama's School of Dentistry will bring every student from each school through the doors of the health center to train in real time with real patients. There is a tremendous opportunity to expose students to alternative careers in Christian, community-based healthcare, and to identify the future leaders who will take on the challenge of bridging the healthcare gap.

As much as Christ Health Center has on its plate, this is truly only the beginning. There is a Federally Qualified Health Center application waiting to be filed, a \$200,000 dental suite to be completed, grants to be written, additional staff to be hired, pharmacy and dental software to be purchased and implemented, documents and forms to be translated, and the list goes on. Yet all of this is with one ultimate goal: to see the glory of God made real in the City of Birmingham that everyone who sees it would come to a saving knowledge of

Jesus Christ.

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