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Columbia, state churches to pool supplies for needy

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BY Madoline Markham

COLUMBIA — Joyce Stanley will drive to the Missouri State Fairgrounds on Saturday, her car full of backpacks filled with school supplies and bags full of dental and health supplies. A member of First Christian Church, Stanley will join thousands of others from all over the state to process and send out these supplies and join in a plethora of other activities as a part of this year's [Festival of Sharing](#).

As part of the festival, more than 3,000 people representing 28 denominations from churches around Missouri will gather on Friday and Saturday in Sedalia to combine resources for mission projects. Countless others from about 2,000 churches have worked all year to gather donations and supplies for people in need locally and worldwide.

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Although the mission and primary activities of the annual event have remained the same during the past 26 years, volunteers have adjusted their work to fit the changing needs of those in Missouri and around the world.

"This year, we are emphasizing the collection of family food boxes , since that is what Missouri organizations are telling us they need," said Festival of Sharing coordinator Terri Williams. "We have seen the number of agencies involved jump from 80 last year to 100 this year. In addition, most agencies are serving increasingly more people."

New to this year's festival is a replica of a Nicaraguan village set up by the Springfield-based Rainbow Network, a nonprofit organization that works with missions in the Latin American country.

Last year, the festival raised \$939,589 in material goods and cash donations, and organizers hope to have the same success this year.

The Festival of Sharing was the first large-scale event of its kind. In fact, many people in other states have taken note of its success and started similar events in their home states, though they generally find that such events are hard to get up and going, Williams said.

One of the major annual activities is repackaging thousands of pounds of rice, beans and potatoes.

Martin Rice Company of southern Missouri and individual farmers have donated 17,000 pounds of rice, and 19,000 pounds of pinto beans were purchased. The Society of St. Andrew, an organization that gathers produce from fields after they have been harvested, will send about 42,000 pounds of Wisconsin potatoes.

On Saturday, volunteers open the enormous 100-pound bags of food items and sack them into 2- or 5-pound bags to distribute to food banks primarily in Missouri.

"There is an undercurrent of chaos because there are so many things going on, but this just adds to wonderful work of the event. Volunteers start off as strangers but work together all day and oftentimes reunite in future years, sort of like a loosely connected reunion," said Linda Reed Brown, former festival staff member and current mission director of Olivet Christian Church.

Several churches in Columbia, including First Christian, Community United Methodist, Columbia United Church of Christ, Broadway Christian, Missouri United Methodist and Olivet Christian, have been working all year to put together health kits, dental kits, school kits and more.

"Putting the kits together is a good way for people to be involved in tangible ways," Brown said. "It is especially important for kids to understand what we are doing and that it's not just about money."

Many churches add more personal items to their kits. First Christian Church members sewed 112 quilts to be put into "backpacks of love" for foster care children, as well as eight crocheted baby blankets to be sent in kits to other countries.

The contents of the kits have changed over the years to meet the changing social and disaster relief needs of people in Missouri and around the world.

This year, Missouri United Methodist Church filled more than 150 flood kits, each with \$45 worth of cleaning supplies including brushes, cleaners and trash bags. The kits will be given to people in flood-damaged areas of southern Missouri.

"It is overwhelming how everything comes together, how everyone pitches in a hand," said Diana Mooney of Missouri United Methodist Church. Mooney became involved with the festival when she was living in Maryville and continued her involvement in Sedalia and now in Columbia.

Churches have also worked to raise money for the needs of the festival. Some churches take up special offerings. Broadway Christian Church raises money by selling garden produce and handmade items at a Work of Our Hands table during Sunday morning services. First Christian Church collects Best Choice labels and turns them in to receive 3 cents for each label, which goes toward the festival.

Churches also send volunteers to help with the events during the festival. Missouri United Methodist Church is sending a group of young people for the Youth Fest events related to the festival. They will join other youth for a special worship service on Friday night, an overnight camp-out and work on Saturday unloading and loading supplies.

Even beyond the rice sacking and supply kit processing, the fairgrounds will be full of activity. On Saturday morning, all of these activities will be put on hold for a half-hour service of thanksgiving, celebration and dedication. The work will pick back up immediately after that.

An auction of quilts sewn by volunteers specifically for the event takes place at noon. "You could just

drool over those gorgeous quilts," Stanley said. Last year, the quilt auction brought \$34,900 in donations.

Educational displays and booths with crafts items will be on display throughout the event. Members of the mission team at Community United Methodist Church set up a booth with fair trade items from their Global Market store.

The festival is part of the Office of Creative Ministries located in Columbia, and Columbia churches involved with the festival have held long-established ties with the event. Many have been involved since the festival started in 1982.

Bob Leach and his wife, Muriel, first got involved with the festival in its infancy and have attended all but two years.

Over the decades he has been involved, Leach has made a special effort to get members of First Christian Church to take part. He built penny planks to encourage donations and ladder-like structures on which to place donated bars of soap.

"We need to gain imagination and attention of the adults, not just the children," he said.

Amid all the camaraderie and heavy work to support the Festival of Sharing, those involved recognize the big picture of the event.

"There are so many denominations represented at the festival," Stanley said. "We are separated by slight differences in our belief structures, but at the festival we put first our belief in Christ and the need to minister to those in need. It makes your faith a living, breathing faith."

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