

Thrift Shops: Ministries and Resources for Resort Settings

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Being called from seminary to the beautiful resort setting of Boone, N.C., was a dream come true—and an affirmation of my personal call to Christian ministries. I could not wait to get here and get all my creative ideas out in the open and implement ministries in this resort area. Thankfully, these ministries went well and we grew in the process.

However, like many other resort areas, Resort Area Ministries in Boone faced many early questions about how to fund our resort ministries. I personally did not want to deal with the “money issue” at first. After all, I had a lot of wonderful ideas about ministries I wanted to try in *resort* settings. I was fortunate that our board of directors had several mature, realistic members who realized early on if any of our ministries were to succeed, we had to find other sources of raising money that would underwrite most of our efforts. This is the story of how we half-stumbled onto and were half dragged by God to see some other possibilities—both for establishing other ministries and funding what we already had.

In 1978, Resort Area Ministries started the first of two thrift shops, which have grown and prospered over the years. When Resort Area Ministries established the thrift shop in Boone, they had two goals in mind: (1) Find an on-going source of income that would hopefully underwrite our resort programs; and (2) Hopefully provide another means of ministering with the local community. Both of these goals have been met.

Here are some of the recurring questions for ministries and volunteers in resort settings: “How do we get started actually doing resort ministries?” Once local churches, associations, state and national groups are approached for “start-up money” for resort ministry locations, the question that keeps coming up is, how do we keep our resort ministry project going after the initial success—after the first two–four years? How do we fund our resort project after the initial “start-up money” is gone? These are hard questions to answer, because no matter how much initial or current “success” in the creativity of a resort project, or the numbers of people with whom we’ve ministered, the positive affirmation we’ve received from our sponsors and audience, the terrible reality of any ministry (that also must be a business) is that it *does* have a financial “bottom line” with which we must live or die.

Ideally, it is nice to think our programs and ministries will be so well perceived by local churches, that they will come through for us financially and underwrite our current and future ministries. Unfortunately, reality breaks through harshly. Churches must deal with economics in recessions and giving slowed by seasonal fluctuations in their income. No matter how great resort ministries are perceived in our communities, the church’s bottom line financially has to be covering their obligations to their staff and the ministries they deem most important. We resort people have to admit to ourselves, if our churches are faced with cutting money for resort ministries (which many adults still view as “fun and games” or put into a recreation category) versus world hunger, or crisis relief (i.e., Hurricane Andrew), most members of churches say “OK, we’ll cut resort ministries back so we can give something to the ‘more important’ ministries in our budgets.”

Early on, Resort Area Ministries in Boone also faced crisis situations financially and struggled to keep our creative heads above water. We tried many short-term fund raisers (i.e., weekend flea markets, auctions, etc.) with moderate success. The fact was, though

these were important to our funding, they did not provide a sound, on-going year-round source of income.

A local Episcopal rector serving on our board suggested Resort Area Ministries look into opening a thrift shop in our town. One in a small neighboring community was doing very well, and he thought it might work for us. My initial impression was something like—“That sounds like social ministries, and I’m not sure it fits into our concept of resort ministries.” Looking back, I’m glad my initial reaction to something “out of the ordinary” for resort ministry locations did not keep us from trying to establish a shop.

In downtown Boone, we found a sympathetic shop owner who had an empty basement beneath a house. We cleaned out the debris and put up racks and shelves, recruited volunteers and ran the shop there for four months. We took in donations of used clothing and resold them at affordable prices. (See the sample price list in file named Sample Thrift Shop Price List on this CD-ROM.)

After this initial time of trial and error, we rented a small two room building on a side street in Boone (800 square feet). From 1978-82, we used volunteers to operate the shop. We hired a retired lady to coordinate the volunteers’ schedules and fill in when no volunteer was there. This lady, Pauline Johnson, was one of our keys to success. She began to see this as an opportunity to help the low-income folks in our area through the ministry of a thrift shop. She filled in many hours as a volunteer herself. As a result of her giving time, energy and direction, the people in the community and local churches started volunteering time themselves. After that first year of operations we cleared \$1,000, which helped finance our resort ministries.

The shop has grown since that first year, and has underwritten the majority of our resort budget. The Boone shop is fifteen years old this year (1993). It’s gross revenues for 1992 was \$108,010. It’s net revenues for RAM’s resort ministries account after expenses was \$39,500. The resort ministries total budget for 1992 was \$59,795.20. Local churches gave \$1,795.00 or 3 percent. Denominational support was \$2,300.00 or 3.84 percent. Boone’s thrift shop support was 66.15 percent of the resort ministries budget.

Another key to the thrift shop’s on-going success was moving the business to larger locations when opportunities presented themselves. As mentioned earlier, we started in an 800 square foot building until 1982 when we expanded to 3,000 square feet of space (including our resort ministries’ offices). We moved and expanded to 8,200 square feet in 1989 (four years later). Each time, income jumped as the result of having better areas to display clothing. Sales increased with each move.

The Boone shop still retains the thrift shop coordinator, Pauline Johnson, along with two full-time employees who deal with our large volume of clothing. Since we are tax exempt (501[c]3), we give tax receipts to donors for used clothing and household items. We occasionally have furniture for sale.

Our community is about 33,000 residents of university (12,000) students, faculty, and staff and local Appalachian mountain people who work in tourism and service-related small businesses. Our thrift shop was the only one of its type when we started. There is presently one other thrift shop run by a community social service agency.

The volume of clothing being donated has grown to staggering proportions. We have four to five “clearing the racks” sales annually. After we sell everything we can, we close down, pack the previous items in bags and boxes, rent a Ryder truck (24 foot size), and haul around 9,000 pounds of clothing to coal mining areas in the southeastern United States

where the need for clothing is greater than our own. We give away approximately 36,000 pounds of clothing to these areas each year. Our dream is to own a truck to assist in the project and to establish a pick up service for folks who want to give, but do not have the transportation to bring larger items (i.e., refrigerators, appliances, furniture) to us. We restock our racks with items our customers haven't seen before. The sales increase dramatically the week after the re-stocking of the shop.

A shop was established in Newland, the small county seat of Avery, N.C., in 1982. This shop has also grown along the same proportions as the Boone shop over the years. The Newland shop has its own board of directors from that county and also provides emergency assistance and supplies food to 40 to 60 families monthly. The Boone shop has a separate organization, the Watauga County Hunger Coalition in the same building that provides similar services in Watauga County. A copy of their operating procedures and various forms can be available upon request.

Employees of the Boone shop were added as soon as finances would permit. As mentioned earlier, Ms. Johnson was hired to coordinate volunteers' schedules and fill in time when there was none available. Four years after opening, we hired a second employee to be responsible for clothing intake and display. Three years later, a third employee was hired for clothing intake, pricing and sizing. Volunteers are utilized to straighten, display, help with light cleaning, and so forth. The Boone shop averages 20 to 25 volunteers per week. Many are from local churches.

Some critical philosophical questions come up early on in most resort ministries settings. Are we just going to develop and maintain responsibility for resort ministries only? If other types of needs are prevalent in our community, can we (as a resort ministries group) meet those needs? (Constitutional adjustments may need to be made and board members and staff need to be open and flexible to change to other forms of ministries if necessary for survival.) If we see needs of tourists in resort settings, is our ministerial vision broad enough to see the local residents' needs as well?

Christ's call was a call to everyone. His call was inclusive of rich and poor, male and female, religious and non-religious. His charge to his disciples was to have a holistic approach to the world as they do ministries. We are charged with outreach, telling the Good News and welcoming strangers, but we are also charged with feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, visiting those in prison, and being available as servant people to *all* those around us, whether they drive a Mercedes or a beat-up pick-up truck (see Matthew 25:31). If we can open our arms wide enough to also include these, Christ can bless us in many different ways we never even dreamed possible! Thanks to Him for those blessings!

I hope you can catch that vision and put it to work in your resort/leisure area. May God bless your efforts!

If Resort Area Ministries may be of service to you in answering more specific questions, please call or write me, Tom Moore, RAM, P.O. Box 24 DTS, Boone, NC 28607; phone (704) 264-6605.

Adapted from an article by Tom Moore in the 1993 National Resort Ministries Conference notebook. Used by permission.