Tiny congregation introduces celebrations to refugee family

By PATRICIA TEMPLETON
News staff writer

PICKETT POST — Before this year, Joe and Jack Toan probably never heard about wise men. But they put on costumes and played the roles for the Christmas program at Bethel Presbyterian Church last Sunday night.

They didn’t have much to say about the Nativity presentation, but thoroughly enjoyed the Christmas tree activities which followed, church leaders said.

The two boys, members of a refugee family being sponsored by Bethel Presbyterian Church in Pickett Post near Walhalla, received gifts from church members. Their favorites were two big trucks, gifts from the church.

The youngsters had to be coaxed to open their gifts. They had hesitated, not knowing whether to open them. Earlier they had found gifts with their names on them and were told to wait on Santa Claus. But with Santa at the scene, still they were a bit reluctant.

The two boys and their parents, Quan and Ngo Thuy Uy, have gotten caught up in the Christmas season and the sponsoring church’s activities. The Toans have a Christmas tree and went caroling — although they didn’t sing — with a group of church members, visiting some homes out in the country.

The members of the Bethel church are discovering the truth to the biblical statement that it is more blessed to give than receive.

Last summer, the congregation decided to sponsor a family of boat people, not an easy task for a church with only 66 members.

The congregation raised more than $2,000 for its family, fixed up the parish home for them to live in, donated food, clothing, and furniture, and found jobs for the refugees.

Then, on Sept. 25, the Toan family arrived at the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport, ready to begin a new life in South Carolina.

Two months later, the family is adjusting well to life in the United States.

And the church members are discovering that the Toans are not the only ones to benefit from the sponsorship.

“The lovingness that has come out of this is amazing,” said Jack Stevenson, pastor of the church. “The results and benefits to the church are much greater than we would have ever thought.”

As a result of the church’s decision to sponsor the Toans, 11 new people are attending the Bethel church, all members of families with Vietnamese ties.

Three other churches have decided to sponsor a family of boat people after seeing the success Bethel Presbyterian has had.

But perhaps most important, the sponsoring of the Toans has brought the members of the congregation closer together, Stevenson said.

“This is an amazing group of people,” he said. “There is a lot of the love of God here.

“This has brought us all closer to each other. People have become very active who were peripheral to church activities before.”

Stevenson said the members of his church have “a great deal of willingness to risk,” a quality that may be unusual for a small church.

“You usually think of country churches as being very conservative,” Stevenson said, “But these people are willing to try something new.”

Toan now is working on a construction job. As soon as he learns enough English he hopes to get a job as a machinist, his previous occupation. His wife is a sewing machine operator.

The boys, who have taken the American names Jack and Joe (after Stevenson and Joe McAllister, chairman of the committee responsible for the Toans) are enrolled at Walhalla Elementary School.

Before coming to South Carolina, the Toans spent six months in a Hong Kong refugee camp, living with thousands of other people in a building similar to an air hanger.

They came to Hong Kong from Vietnam on a boat with 80 other people, eating sweet potatoes and drinking water for the 60 days they were at sea.

As they entered the bay to Hong Kong, the boat was caught in a storm and tossed around on the open sea for three days.

“We just don’t know what they have been through. We just can’t imagine it,” Stevenson said.

Now, the Toans say they are happy with their new life.

Toan says he likes the freedom to be able to do anything he likes in the United States. And the people have been very helpful and friendly, he says.

Stevenson says the reason for the Toans’ rapid adjustment is themselves.

“They wanted to go to work right away,” he said. “Quan is aggressively growing. He keeps a booklet with American terms and their Chinese translations and carries the book everywhere with him.”

And with the Toans’ adjustment and growth has come growth for the members of Bethel Presbyterian, who have found that giving can indeed be blessed.