SUNDAY SERVICE DELIVERED. Patsy Barbree (left, seated) and Lee Morgan (top left, rear) sit and talk with Mr. And Mrs. Vincent Sunday afternoon following New Covenant Presbyterian Church's Christmas service at the Lake Marion Nursing Home in Summerton. The Vincent's recently celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary.
Embracing the forgotten

New Covenant Church group visits nursing home weekly

By Drew Tripp
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SUMMERTON — As winter begins to clasp Clarendon County in its icy grip, the Christmas spirit of togetherness and giving is taking hold of many residents throughout the county.

A perfect example of that Christmas spirit was on display Sunday at Lake Marion Nursing Home on Urbana Road in Summerton, when members of the congregation from New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Manning joined nursing home residents for an afternoon of fellowship and worship during the church’s third annual Christmas service at the nursing home.

What took place Sunday wasn’t just a one-time occurrence. In fact, churchgoers from New Covenant have made sure to stop by Lake Marion Nursing Home to spend time with its residents every Sunday afternoon for the last two and one-half years.

And, it all started with one man who says he felt a calling, New Covenant member Joe Roberts.

“When I changed my life and started living for the Lord in 2002, I felt compelled to do this,” Roberts said of his inspiration to begin conducting the ministry. “My mother always wanted to do nursing home ministry, but her health never allowed her to do that.

“Something kept telling me to do this, and when I went to our minister about it, he said he’d been looking for someone to do it. It was like the Lord pushed us here. We’ve been involved ever since, and we love it.”

The minister is the Rev. Charles C. Tyler of New Covenant. Tyler says the weekly visit to the nursing home has become part of the routine for both the home’s residents and members of New Covenant.

“This is what we love to do,” Tyler said. “It’s an extension of who we are now.”

Tom Stone, another New Covenant member and a regular visitor to the services at the nursing home, offered some insight into the weekly happenings.

“This is much more than just Christmas. We’re here every Sunday,” Stone said. “We try to make it as much of a family or religious setting as we can, given the circumstances that exist. These people don’t really have anyone to provide a family or religious setting, so we just try to make it as close to an actual church service as we possibly can.

“We do a church service every week for the people here, and try to celebrate communion every three months. We stick literally to the scripture, and it’s non-denominational. The message is for everybody. If you believe in the Lord and want to know the scripture, this is the place for you.”

Both Stone and Roberts stress that the weekly fellowship has become a cherished happening for the New Covenant members and the Lake Marion residents, filled with strong bonds and new-found loved ones.

“They’ve gotten to be like our family, and they’ve let us into theirs,” Stone said. “It’s a blessing not only to them, but to us as well. They appreciate everything we do, and you can tell. They really look forward to seeing us each week.

“When we first came here two and a half years ago, they were very standoffish and withdrawn. They didn’t like us touching them. Now, I think they love us as much as we love them. They don’t hold back from us, and they’ve got a smile on their faces.”

Roberts expressed similar sentiments.

“It wasn’t easy the first time we came out here to hold these hands and kiss these cheeks, but now, they’re just like our family,” said Roberts. “We hug them, and put our arms around them, and they’re excited to see us when we come in each week.

You can’t describe the feeling. “These people have no one and nothing. Meanwhile, we’re all out here free to roam and do as we please. To be able to come out here and share this with them, and love them — with the way they embrace us now — it means everything. This is what the Lord intended for his people.”

Jewel Craft, a resident of the nursing home perhaps summed up the relationship best.

“They inspire each and every one of us, and we always enjoy the message,” Craft said. “We certainly appreciate them, and you can tell they feel the same about us.”

Tyler and members of the New Covenant congregation conduct the services each Sunday at 2 p.m.