

The Christmas Mall

In 2011, River City Christian (formerly First Covenant Church of Sacramento), a large regional church located at Hwy 50 and Sunrise Blvd, launched what has now become our largest outreach event for needy families called "The Christmas Mall." This two day event provides practical assistance during the Christmas holiday season for low income individuals and families.

U.S. Census data (2013) indicates that 17.6% of Sacramento's population lives below the federal poverty level. That is higher than the state poverty rate of 15.3%. Needless to say, there is much work to be done to assure that Sacramento residents, especially the children, have their basic needs met. While needy individuals often have access to services for food, clothing and other basic needs, most of the time recipients have little or no say in what services and/or items they receive.

In 2011 our Executive Pastor, Mark Shetler, spearheaded the creation of a holiday event designed to provide the needy in our community something truly different: a day of fun, pampering, and shopping beyond their basic needs. His idea was to allow our guests to experience the dignity of choice. Guests would choose which presents to give to family members; guests would choose which personal services to enjoy; and guests would choose which activities to include in their visit.

Our first Christmas Mall served 350 guests. Since inception, The Christmas Mall has grown significantly. In 2014 we served more than 950 guests over a two day period. Needy families and individuals are bussed to the church campus from several area non-profit organizations that work with low income individuals and families. The Christmas Mall is truly a community partnership. Over the past four years we have partnered with Francis House, Wellspring Women's Center, Powerhouse Ministries, and World Relief. These organizations screen the applicants and provide a meeting place for our busses to pick up and deliver the families on the weekend of the event. Groups of 200–250 guests arrive on our campus every couple of hours throughout the event. This helps us maintain the quality of service to our guests and permits us to organize shifts for our 700 plus volunteers.

Upon arrival, guests are given a voucher worth 50 "points" of shopping in our six Mall stores. Each person (including babies and children) receives a voucher. Guests are first treated to a full meal and entertainment (music and dance performances) in our large Worship Center. After the meal, they go directly to the "shopping mall" where they have an hour to shop in our six different stores (Toys, Babies, Kids, Women's, Men's, Sports). All merchandise is NEW and is collected from the generous contributions of our congregation throughout the year. Items are sorted by "store" and given a point value. Each guest may purchase up to 50 points worth of merchandise. When an hour of shopping is complete, we close all of the stores (so that we can re-stock our merchandise for the next group of guests) and the guests are then free to participate in any of the FREE fun services and activities that we offer including:

- Gift Wrap—We provide full gift wrap services for the items that have been "purchased" from the stores. All guests have their own shopping bags, so that parents and children can

keep their gifts as surprises for other family members. Presents can be left at the gift wrap room to be wrapped and tagged and are picked up later in the day prior to guest departure.

- Salon and Spa—We provide a fully equipped salon, staffed by trained professionals in our large gym. Cosmetology schools in the Sacramento area and some of our own salon professionals treat our guests to shampoos, haircuts and styles, manicures, and chair massages.
- Fully staffed Youth Café—We provide snacks and fun activities for teens, including ping pong, air hockey, video games, movies, and a casual environment to “hang out” with other teens.
- Nursery Care—We provide trained and fingerprinted staff to supervise children age four and under, so that parents can shop, use our services, and participate in our activities worry-free.
- Candyland—We provide a complete fun zone for children ages five through eleven. This area offers with bounce houses, crafts, movies, and other fully-staffed activities. Children can be checked in to the Candyland area by their parents for a 90-minute time period.
- Photo Booth—We provide family photos and pictures with Santa.
- Personal Assistance—We provide a first aid/lost child station, personal shoppers (for disabled guests or guests with small children), translators, and a secure storage area in which to leave personal belongings, staffed by our security team.

Guests are typically on campus for four to six hours and we offer round trip bus rides from the agency that they signed up with. Each person leaves our campus with an armload of Christmas gifts for their family members and memories of a day of fun and pampering.

Over 700 volunteers serve our guests at The Christmas Mall, beginning with the decorating of the entire church campus, the stocking of the stores on Wednesday and Thursday prior to the event, and culminating with the clean-up and tear down of the event on Saturday evening.

A Christmas Mall task force, led by the Pastor of Community Outreach, Fred Hammer, meets throughout the year to plan, train volunteers and coordinate this huge event. Volunteers come from River City Christian, as well as Bryan College, Marinello Beauty College, Paul Mitchell, and Union Mine High School ROP Program, the Soroptomists, CERT (Sac Metro Fire) and National Holistic Institute. We have also had support from area businesses, aid agencies and churches including but not limited to: Asurea Insurance Agency, Bayside Folsom, Bridges Church Folsom, Caltronics, Cordova Food Locker, Creekside Church Rocklin, Delta Restaurant Supply and Party Rentals, Food Service Insurance Managers, Gathering Place Church of Folsom, Harbor Church Folsom, Lakeside Church, Oak Hills Church, River Rock Church, Sierra Pacific Mortgage, The Bridge Community Church, and Trinity Episcopal Church.

In March of 2016 we were honored by the Folsom Cordova Unified School District as their “Faith Based Partner of the Year” for our partnership with Rancho Cordova Elementary at the 2015 Christmas Mall.