

A step of faith leads Mount Olive man to children's shoe ministry

By Lisa Osburn -- The Birmingham News

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From the Andes Mountains in Ecuador to remote areas of Bolivia, Bill Conlee has washed the feet of some of the world's poorest children.

The biblical implications are not lost on the Mount Olive man, but the act is one of necessity.

Before Conlee gives the children new socks and new shoes through his Christian mission - Happy Feet International -- he must remove years of dirt. Many of the children have never worn shoes.

"These are humble people," he said. "They are hungry to hear the gospel. They are hungry for hope; their lives are so hard."

Conlee, a former Hoover firefighter, started Happy Feet International in 2004 after going on similar missions while working with Gardendale First Baptist, starting in 2001.

Each trip, Conlee takes 1,000 pairs of children's shoes to a third-world country, typically in Central or South America. The shoes are a tool to reach people who have never heard the gospel, he said.

Churches throughout the United States sponsor the trips, sending members to help Conlee. They usually avoid the cities, preferring remote villages, he said.

At least once a year, Conlee takes a trip with the "Extreme Team."

These trips are for firefighters, police officers and other men who are willing to leave civilization for a week and walk into the jungles and mountains, sometimes for days, to find the more remote villages.

Conlee, 46, returned from one of these trips on Oct. 24, about four weeks after undergoing back surgery. His team went to Costa Rica where they traveled by foot and boat along the San Juan River.

"These are strong believers who want to spread the gospel," he said. "Hoover firefighters, a few police officers -- they go on what we call the extreme trips. We will go 10 to 20 hours out and sleep in tents."

Ryan Morton, a Hoover firefighter, went on the Costa Rica trip, his fourth with Happy Feet.

"This was the first trip where we would go into some villages and there would be no electricity," he said. "They had, literally, zero electricity."

The people lived in houses that were pieced together with different materials, some with packed dirt floors. They made their own clothing or wore random items, like a Reebok sweat-



Bill Conlee, president and executive director of Happy Feet International, brings shoes and the gospel to thousands of children in typically Central or South America. (Special to The Birmingham News)

shirt, they acquired by trading on the river, Morton said.

The group worked with interpreters, washing the feet of both children and adults.

'Real, real receptive'

"These people are so receiving of us," Morton said. " They are real, real receptive of why we are there. That is why I love Happy Feet. People ask, ' Why do you take shoes; why not food or other supplies?' Anything we would take over there, even the shoes, those things will not last. Telling them about Jesus, that will last for an eternity."

People traveling with Happy Feet carry " salvation" bracelets, which have colored beads representing steps a person can take to accept Jesus, Conlee said. The bracelets help with the communication barriers, since many of the places Conlee visits speak native languages, such as Mayan.

Although he is Baptist, Conlee said Happy Feet missions are non- denominational.

" We just share the simple message of Jesus," he said. " The people are not going to understand denominations."

Conlee left the Hoover Fire Department in 1997, headed to a seminary in Tennessee with the support of his wife, Mary, and daughters Brittney and Abbey. He has degrees from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Bethel College, Mid- America Baptist Theological Seminary and Andersonville Baptist Theological Seminary. Conlee formed a board of directors for Happy Feet in 2004. He serves as president and executive director for the nonprofit mission organization.

"Happy Feet is a ministry of humility, washing feet," he said. " We don't do too much in the ways of advertising. People hear about us from word of mouth. The Bible says, 'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.' We are not seeking attention."

Instead of asking for donations, Conlee sells Boston butts and ribs on the weekend from his mobile kitchen.

Churches from across the country, including California, Texas, Tennessee and Mississippi have sponsored trips.

"The Lord has blessed this," Conlee said of Happy Feet. " People ask me about my business plan. I don't have a business plan. This is something the Lord has developed."