

# Christmas in the Delta: 350 Mississippi BSU students 'serve in their own backyard'

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Over 350 Baptist Student Union (BSU) students from 18 different college campuses across Mississippi engaged with over 40 mission partners and churches to share and live out the Gospel in 9 counties of the Delta region.

*Christmas in the Delta*, a BSU ministry mobilizing students for its second year in a row, met the needs of communities through construction projects, food pantries, local school ministries, outreach block parties, special church events, serving graduates of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) extension center in the Mississippi State Penitentiary (also known as Parchman), and handwriting more than 100 Christmas cards to encourage pastors in the Delta and across MS. In between the labor and ministry, BSU students took time for debriefs and corporate worship sessions together.

In March 2023, Josh Warren, BSU Director at MS Delta Community College, and Zach Hardy, BSU Director at Delta State University, got together to plan a statewide mobilization of BSU students and brought the vision to Sam Ivy, Director of Collegiate Ministries of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB). That next December, the first run of *Christmas in the Delta* mobilized 87 students.

"The vision, the heart, and the passion of two local BSU directors created this ministry, and it was met with roaring affirmation from our other BSU directors," said Ivy. "It was a great opportunity to invest in college students and to mobilize them to know Christ and to make Him known.

*“Christmas in the Delta,”* Ivy emphasized, “is about supporting the local church, mobilizing students, and engaging the lost in the communities of the Delta with the hope of Christ. Our main goal is mobilizing these students to articulate their faith and share it where we need more church support, more boots on the ground, and more laborers for the harvest. Luke 10:2 reads, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,’ and the heartbeat behind *Christmas in the Delta* is just calling out laborers to go where the harvest is plentiful.”

With 87 BSU students organized last December, the MBCB Collegiate Ministries department expected between 150-200 students this year. Until Nov. 1, however, Ivy and other coordinators of the week were not aware of the 350+ BSU students planning to give part of their winter break for *Christmas in the Delta*. The coordinating team had a short month to rearrange logistics for twice the number of students expected, but Emmanuel Church in Greenville and First Church Rolling Fork jumped in with an offer of two housing sites for the students, in addition to First Church Cleveland’s student building and dorms of Delta State University.

On Dec. 16, 115 BSU students helped support the NOBTS graduates at Parchman by leading a worship song in the ceremony and hosting a reception with an open taco bar. Four hundred people – guests, families of the graduates, BSU students, and students in the seminary program – attended the reception in the visitor center.

The BSU students shared their testimonies and heard testimonies from the Parchman students. Last year, BSU students gave money to buy chairs for the chapel in the penitentiary. This year, the students’ contribution purchased two iPads for the extension center’s professors, to aid in classwork, and a Bible for each of the graduates.

“The reason we mobilized our students in prison ministry this year and last year is because we believe in what God’s doing

through MS Baptist's efforts through the NOBTS extension center at Parchman," said Ivy. "We want our BSU students to have their worldview shaken to the point where Christ's radical grace is on full display when they're hearing the testimonies of God's goodness in the lives of those students at Parchman. The Gospel can save everyone, no matter their condition."

Other ministry sites throughout the week included more than 50 BSU students in Sunflower County alone, meeting the needs of residents there by building wheelchair ramps and porches. Although the work conditions were meddled with rain every day, caking the ground in mud, the students went out and did their jobs, completing every job they had set out to do.



MS Baptist Disaster Relief deployed over 30 volunteers on three feeding sites in Rolling Fork, Sunflower, and Cleveland to feed the Mississippi BSU students breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day during Christmas in the Delta. (Photo credit: Sam Ivy)

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Students also worked with Rolling Fork Rising, a ministry out of First Church Rolling Fork after the EF-4 tornado which devastated the town in March 2023, serving in many roles including yard work, house construction, and painting. Students also worked with Reclaimed Project across the Delta and assisted in afterschool care throughout the nine counties.

Bryce Johnson, a BSU student of Copiah-Lincoln Community College, joined *Christmas in the Delta* for a second year. As he busily painted a window trimming of one of the many houses being built or restored for residents, he commented, "You always hear people say, 'You can serve in your backyard; you don't have to go overseas to serve.' Coming here is almost like coming to my backyard. It's just awesome to be able to serve your own state for the glory of God."

Leo Frank, a BSU Student of the University of Mississippi, shared onsite, "I've been cutting a lot of wood and drilling a lot of wood. We've been building a ramp for a woman who needs to get out of her house with a wheelchair. Currently, her ramp is just way too short, so we built an L-shaped ramp around the house and just need to lay boards down to deck it and put some railings up. It's great to be doing this work. I love that we can give to those who may not have as much as we do, especially during Christmas time when we're living the high life. I didn't realize until the first night we were all in the big auditorium how many BSU students there are in the state. So it was cool to see that I'm a part of that."

Tyler Bolen, BSU Associate Director at the University of

Mississippi, added, "Right now we're building a wheelchair ramp, we have a crew inside that's widening the bathroom door and installing a new toilet seat, and yesterday we put up a new storm door. We're really grateful to be part of this work. I've never really done much construction before, so it's awesome to learn and do that, but also to be able to serve the Lord in this way and help this woman so she can get in and out of her house."

"Housing and mobilizing the students would not have been possible without the churches who saw our needs, as well," said Ivy. "They rallied behind us and helped us to accomplish this. Another huge support that made this week possible is MS Baptist Disaster Relief, who came alongside us and deployed over 30 volunteers on three feeding sites in Rolling Fork, Sunflower, and Cleveland to feed us breakfast, lunch, and dinner every single day of the entire trip. They served almost 4,000 meals.

"Seeing the teamwork between our seasoned Disaster Relief teams and our BSU students just reminded me that one day they will pass the baton to these guys and girls. Disaster Relief is a very established ministry in MS. BSU is a very established ministry in MS, but these two ministries have never converged like this before. This cross-departmental partnership was a very special part of our success in sharing the hope we have in Christ. I can't tell you how many Gospel conversations were had, because they were just constantly happening. The Gospel was shared in these communities so many times."

*Christmas in the Delta* is a ministry of the BSU, supported by your gifts to the Margaret Lackey State Offering.