

# Worship service at county fair draws nearly 2,000

## Event was open to all denominations

By JEANNINE F. HUNTER  
Staff Writer

**FRANKLIN** — To Janet Slayden, the event was a foretaste of what heaven would be like.

"What will it look like in heaven? What we witnessed tonight in this place," Slayden said as families of various ethnicities and ages filed out of the Williamson County Ag Expo Arena last night. "If we believe that the body of Christ is not defined by how you look, which church you worship in or where you live, then we have to live how we believe."

Slayden, a board member of the Operation Andrew Group, was among nearly 2,000 people assembled for a multiethnic, multigenerational and multid denominational

worship service yesterday during the Williamson County Fair.

The Nashville-based organization, formed five years ago after a Billy Graham crusade in Nashville, sponsors several free events each year. It consists of members from about 250 greater-Nashville churches working together on events, including a worship service coming up Sunday at 6 p.m. at Fifteenth Street Baptist Church in Nashville.

Called "South Gathering — One Day in Worship," the event yesterday was patterned after another annual event the organization used to hold at the Gaylord Entertainment Center that, at times, brought 10,000 people to downtown Nashville.

The Rev. Charles McGowan, president of the Operation Andrew Group and former senior pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church, said the organization eventually started holding events at different churches throughout the region.

He noted that the organization, committed to helping individuals, found that it was cost-effective to rotate the events.

Donations collected yesterday went to support GraceWorks, a Franklin-based ministry that provides emergency assistance, a parish nurse program, a thrift store and other services for people in need in Williamson County.

Graceworks Executive Director Cheryl King said she was overwhelmed to learn that her organization would be the beneficiary of the night's offering. Worshipers watched a video about the 9-year-

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old ministry before Smith addressed nearly 2,000 people assembled inside the Williamson County AgExpo Arena.

She said she was grateful to reach thousands who could support her efforts by donating money and supplies, volunteering and spreading the word about the need to assist people in short-term and long-term crises in Williamson County.

McGowan said the mission of the Operation Andrew Group is to encourage fellowship among Christians across denominational, racial, geographic and socioeconomic lines, as well as to rally support around a common cause.

The fair drew a huge crowd in addition to the evening worshippers.

Traffic came to a crawl between the Cool Springs Galleria Boulevard and Peytonsville Road exits of Interstate 65 South. About a mile north of Exit 61 for Peytonsville Road/Spring Hill, vehicles merged on the right shoulder to exit the interstate and head toward the fair. Signs of the fair visible from the road included a lighted Ferris wheel as well as throngs of fairgoers walking on the road above the interstate toward the Williamson County Fair Expo Center.

Fair officials said they collected about 50,000 individual tickets, one ticket per person, Saturday; an estimated attendance was not available yesterday evening, particularly since visitors continued to make their way through the gates after 8 p.m. ■

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Ryan Williams plays the music during the worship service with drums to the rhythm.