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Volunteers at the Albany Rescue Mission prepare Christmas meals for residents and the public on Christmas Day. From left, cook Bernard Watkins, Jimmy Stephens and his wife Selina Stephens give a helping hand.

ALBANY RESCUE MISSION: Christmas dinner for 20 years

■ The Albany Rescue Mission traditionally feeds the hungry on Christmas Day.

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ALBANY — The volunteers, residents and others who partook of Christmas dinner at the Albany Rescue Mission Friday never forgot the day's meaning.

"A good meal is important, but the real thing to remember is that this is Christ's birthday," Jimmie Hightower, 54, a past mission resident, said.

"It is all about thanking God for Jesus' birth," Hightower added while waiting for the noon chapel service at 604 North Monroe St.

Current resident Lawrence Fair, 53, agreed with the sentiment.

"It is not just about the meal," Fair said. "It is about the birth of the Lord, and that means everything to me in the world."

The Albany Rescue Mission has been providing food, shelter and Christian spirituality for 20 years, said Larry Hample, the organization's founder and director. In addition to holiday meals, the mission serves more than 7,000 meals a month to residents and anyone who shows up.

The mission is open 365 days a year and serves three meals a day to residents and others, its Web site albanyrescuemission.org stated.

Friday's meal included turkey, ham, stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, and banana pudding.

The meal's ingredients came from community donations, including those given by the Dougherty County Sheriff's Office.

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"We cooked nine turkeys from the sheriff, and nine hams from the community," said Bernard Watkins, 43, a cook and mission resident. "We can have 115 to 200 people to dinner."

Watkins had plenty of help cooking, slicing and serving the meals from volunteers.

"I just felt that this was where I should be," said

Charline Kimbrel, 41, a first-time volunteer. "This is what Christmas should be about, helping others."

Other volunteers repeated that sentiment as they cut turkey and arranged platters for the meal.

"I just think this is a good place to be," Jimmy Stephenson, 56, said. "It helps folks get something good to eat."

The Rescue Mission has been more than a place to get a holiday meal for at least two of the Christmas Day volunteers. Two years ago, Henry Legg, 44, and

Tammy Dozier, 46, came to the shelter as residents.

Now Legg and Dozier volunteer at the mission, attend chapel services and have their lives on a better track, Legg said. He credits the program at the mission with giving him the help he needed to get his life together.

"We came here two years ago last July. We were residents and not doing good," Legg said. "This place changed my life. I'm now responsible and have a job. It turned my life around."