

It Worked for Us 2008

Ardmore District

Prayer Circle, Lighthouse UMC, Kingston

Two women started a Prayer Circle on Wednesday nights. With Jesus in the middle, that group has grown to 12 people. They meet for about 15 minutes, joining hands and voices in intercessory prayer. Across four years, they have become more aware of seeing each other as fellow workers for Christ.

The circle members described prayer's positive impact at Lighthouse church. Membership has increased by about 25 new people per year. Youth Night attendance has climbed from eight to about 25.

"We have seen cancers go into remission and people healed from intercessory prayer," wrote Pat Reider in the award application.

"Furthermore, after building a new church, we were struggling financially. We prayed especially for our finances and, within two months, paid off our parsonage, around \$20,000."

Bartlesville District

Poverty Workshop, Dewey UMC

A Rotation Sunday School program attracted children who had never attended the Dewey church. Classroom themes were Daniel in the Lions' Den (music), an Upper Room (food-related lessons), Garden of Eden (arts and crafts), Noah's Ark (drama and storytelling), Bible Max (movie room), and the DUMC Newsroom (interviews with Bible characters).

"We soon learned we did not have the slightest notion how to reach unchurched and at-risk children, how to blend them with children already attending church," said Jalynn Youngberg. "We weren't equipped to teach this new generation and, especially, children of poverty."

A resource hunt linked church leaders to education specialists and led to a training workshop, "Against All Odds: Teaching and Reaching Children in Poverty." Due to interest, the wider community was invited, and a satellite session was presented at Cleora UMC. Participants learned: how to establish a classroom routine, how to quiet a group of youngsters and maintain order without speaking loudly, the culture of poverty, the underlying causes of behavior issues, multiple intelligences and learning styles, and how best to nurture and love at-risk children.

Connections were developed between the church and public school officials.

"We finally had the tools to create a successful ministry program. Our Sunday School program attendance more than doubled in a year. Our children's program on Wednesday nights has quadrupled in attendance," Youngberg said.

"Numbers don't really tell the story. Regardless of the number, we are blessed to be God's instrument of change in children's lives and a place where they know they are loved. We have them for about six hours a week; we try to make those the best six hours possible!"

Clinton District

The Upper Room class, Sentinel UMC

About 30 people, mostly couples, in their 20s and 30s, were invited to an evening meal. They did not regularly attend church. The Sunday school superintendent had compiled the names.

Five people attended and expressed interest in further involvement. Church leaders launched a new class, called The Upper Room. An early request by class members was a Marriage Enrichment Course. Evening meals were offered prior to classes. A nursery worker was hired; a class for 2- and 3-year-olds was organized. Weekly messages were sent, encouraging class attendance.

Church attendance has increased from 50 to 75-80 people. Youngsters are present in worship. The congregation has celebrated the births of four children, and more are pending.

Members of the new class are helping lead Sunday morning worship and are serving on committees. A fall Confirmation Class is planned for the group.

Enid District

We Can Make a Difference, Pond Creek UMC

Harvey Phelps felt deeply about reaching out to youngsters who did not attend church and who were home alone after school. Pond Creek church had a new multipurpose building. Thus began the "Pizza, Music, and Hoops" group, alias "Harvey's kids," now named "We Can Make a Difference" to epitomize the mission to students in fifth grade and older.

Weekly during the school year, youngsters arrive at the church to eat all the pizza they can, hear a lesson or perform a drama based on a Bible story, play ball in the gym, and sing Christian songs.

Fifth- and sixth-graders meet on Tuesday; seventh- and eighth-graders and Advanced Singers, on Wednesday. Advanced Singers are limited to high-school students willing to sing solos. The group performs at other churches and the state fair.

"By singing in our church as well as other churches, they are brought into the fellowship of a community of faith and shown the love of God in ways they might otherwise never experience. Many of the children over the years have joined the congregation, opening the doors for their parents to come and learn more about God's love for them and their children," said Pastor Sonja Tobey.

Lawton District

Living Nativity Trail, Cache UMC

An interactive hayride during the Christmas season transports guests back in time 2,000 years, for a 2-mile trek to Bethlehem.

At various points along the route, vignettes depict the wise men, shepherds, King Herod, etc. There are dramatic scenes featuring the wagon guides. The sets are extensive. Cookies are served.

"This huge undertaking has provided an opportunity to use many gifts. Occasional (church) attendees get involved, and we invite others to participate, who also have begun attending (church)," said Pastor Jennifer K. Long.

"The first year, we had 275 guests; the second year, about 450; and last year, 980!"

McAlester District

Prayer Bear Ministry,
Barnard Memorial UMC, Holdenville

Church member Mary Boren received the gift of a Prayer Bear—and thus began a ministry of service to deployed military personnel.

A Prayer Bear is a handmade cloth bear, with a golden cross marking its heart and a gentle expression on its face. It is flat, not filled with stuffing, so it can be folded and carried in a pocket. One side of the bear is solid color, and one is of printed fabric, sometimes a patriotic pattern. Two bears are made per soldier; one goes to the soldier, and one to his/her family. Each bear has a label, describing it as "made and given to you with prayer from Christian friends in Hughes County, OK."

The church's goal is to make 4,800 bears for military personnel deployed from Fort Sill Army

Base, Lawton. The first shipment was blessed in worship on May 4.

Regular craft times at the church were published in the local newspaper. The youth took part by ironing cloth, tracing patterns, and cutting and pinning the two pieces of each bear together, ready for other volunteers to sew. People unable to attend the workdays took home materials to cut out the bears or draw the faces and hearts in their spare time.

"To the delight of everyone involved, individuals from the community came to help with this project," said Marsha Salazar. "The positive impact is seen in the caring faces of the workers. They share family stories together, as well as meals, and have become a more caring group within the membership. Their focus is on the soldiers away from home, and their families, making sure they have a connection to one another through prayer."

Muskogee District

Spring Play, Gore UMC

The Gore church has staged three full-length plays, drawing on all age groups in the congregation to fill the casting needs.

"It has been a powerful way for us to encourage self-esteem, self-expression, and invest in the development of a God-shaped imagination. The arts is a powerful and effective way for persons of all ages to grow," said Louise Micolites. "We have intentionally chosen non-explicit religious themes and have produced classic tales: 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' 'The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,' and 'Anne of Green Gables.' This has been a good way to open wider the door to community members to not feel threatened in coming to our plays."

Attendance at each performance has averaged 250 people. "In a community of less than 2,000, we are quite pleased," Micolites said.

The ministry is directed by a team of three laypeople. In general, each play has featured a 20-member cast and cost \$1,000 to produce, including stage construction, props, publicity, and royalty fees.

OKC-North District

Support Our Soldiers,
OKC-Chapel Hill UMC

Two Chapel Hill members, whose sons were deployed to Iraq, launched this ministry in 2003. Their idea ignited an amazing network of prayer,

huge support, and generous giving for deployed friends and relatives.

Care packages are shipped at least twice a year for military personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. A total of 12 shipments, more than 12,000 pounds, had been sent as of Spring 2008. Each shipment comprises more than 100 boxes.

Participation in "Support Our Soldiers" has expanded beyond the church to the wider community.

Newsletter articles, worship announcements, and lists in the church's Welcome Center solicit donated items and cash. Members of all ages also send cards and write notes to include in the boxes.

The annual value of gifts totals \$10,000-\$12,000, and includes money to cover shipping expenses. In addition to the donated items, the S.O.S. committee shops with the cash gifts to get items such as DVD movies, games, and Bibles. On packing day, 20 to 30 volunteers prepare and deliver the boxes to the shipping firm.

Each recipient is notified that he/she is included on the church's Military Prayer List. The committee updates that list and collects deployment addresses throughout the year. The church has received numerous thank-you letters from the military officers and chaplains. Sometimes an entire company has shared in the shipment.

Gifts have included knitted ski hats and cooling neck wraps, all made by members, plus Girl Scout cookies and Boy Scout popcorn. An ongoing recycling project collects magazines to be shipped. One member collected paperback books at the assisted living center where he resides.

OKC-South District

Prayer Shawl Ministry,
McFarlin UMC, Norman

The first blessing ceremony anointed 23 handmade prayer shawls in Spring 2005 at the McFarlin church. A total of 528 shawls had been crafted, blessed, and given away by Spring 2008.

About 20 women meet bimonthly to sew, praying over their work. Scarves are made, along with the knitted and crocheted shawls. Initially the gifts went to church members experiencing crises. The ministry has expanded greatly.

"We have shawls and scarves all over the world, sent at the requests of members of our congregation," said Susan Carruth. "We have sent shawls on our high school and college mission trips. We knit dishcloths and give them to all the couples that marry at McFarlin.

"I recently received a call from a Baptist chaplain at Norman Regional Hospital, asking if our shawls were non-denominational. He needed one for the family of a patient in ICU. Of course we got it to him that afternoon!"

A tea party in December extends appreciation to those who stitch the gifts, and a Spring 2008 tea party featured women in hats sharing stories about the shawls.

Carruth said, "We have brought together people who have needed a place to share their gifts and talents, and are themselves benefiting from this ministry as much or more than (it) has benefited others. It has brought some members back to church."

Stillwater District

Community Clean Up, Orlando UMC

New outreach by the Orlando church is building trust between the church and the community, population 201. Members began by cleaning several lots, both vacant and occupied; clearing weeds and bushes along several streets, with the use of a brush-hog; and offering a monthly lunch to the public, served at the church.

"This has enabled us to make face-to-face contact with people who feel marginalized not only by society but by the church as well," stated Pastor Adrian Pollard. "We have gotten to know them and they have gotten to know us—no more 'us and them.' We have been blessed by many in the community whom we have come to know. Several have attended our worship services; they no longer see the church as just for 'insiders.' One man, who had not been in church for 20 years, recently started attending our worship service."

Rev. Pollard said, "Jesus never made anyone feel like a 'project.' He loved them and dealt with them through love and concern for their well-being. That is what we are trying to do. We are an older congregation; it is so encouraging to see seniors involved in this outreach."

Tulsa District

SHARE Day, Heritage UMC, Broken Arrow

A free garage sale extends radical hospitality at Heritage UMC. The church adapted an idea from Interpreter, the official UM program magazine. The Care Ministry team led planning for SHARE Day. SHARE means "Supporting Humanity and Responding Enthusiastically."

During the week prior to SHARE Day 2006, vehicles loaded with donations rolled up to the church, and volunteers set up rooms for clothing, household items, books, toys, and furniture. Items were lovingly sorted and displayed. Smiles and cold beverages greeted guests the day of the event.

"We had the honor to serve more than 200 people. We got to see their surprise and gratitude when they found out their 'finds' were truly free," said Dana Watt.

More free items were added for SHARE Day 2007. Drawings were held for free groceries and gasoline. The youth group washed cars for free. Breakfast coffee/donuts and lunchtime hotdogs/lemonade were served free of charge.

"We even had free puppies," Watt said.

About 750 people were served that day. Unsold items were donated to Restore Hope, a UM aid agency, and Goodwill.

The 2008 SHARE Day was scheduled for Aug. 9.

Watt said the events have drawn visitors to church services and new members into the church family.

"The cost is very little, mostly hard work. Relationships within your congregation will develop as a result of working together, and you will become disciples for Christ by doing what he did—serve others," she said.

Woodward District

Break'n Bread,
St. Paul's UMC, Boise City

This church, four blocks from the Boise City school, has made ministry with youth its primary focus. Space for and support of "Break'n Bread" is basic to that focus.

During the school year, lunch is served twice a month to fifth- through 12th-graders. In 2007-08, attendance was 95-100, in a community of 1,400 people, with a school population of 157 at those grade levels.

"We make sure music by some of the latest and/or favorite Christian bands and vocalists are playing above the level of conversation," said Pastor James Hewett.

A \$2 donation is requested, but not required. The ministry funding is separate from the church's general budget.

The ministry "functions because dedicated retirees and others are there early to cook and serve. Around noon another crew of members, who give their lunch hour to help, arrives and begins the clean-up process," said Dr. Hewett.

"Since November 2006, 21 youths have joined our church—mostly on profession of faith. Several parents of these also joined."