



PATHWAY

WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

» StepUP Ministry «

» STEPUP MINISTRY - WHITE MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, RALEIGH, NC

What once began as a program to house the homeless, StepUP Ministry is now a broad financial ministry with a philosophy of leading people toward self-sufficiency. Beginning in 1990 at White Memorial Presbyterian Church, StepUP does more than teach people how to manage their finances. The program shows them how to plan for their futures by taking them, one step at a time, through the mechanics of getting and keeping a job, maintaining relationships, and eventually enjoying the fruits of a stable life.

When it first began addressing the problem of homelessness, the church purchased houses throughout Wake County. Leaders soon realized that homelessness was only a symptom of a larger problem. "At one point we owned 16 or 17 homes," said Steve Swayne, executive director of StepUP Ministry. Overwhelmed by the need, church members saw that they had to provide job skills and life skills training "to teach people how to fish," Swayne said. Now the church owns four homes that it rents to those who need housing. "We are not in the housing business," Swayne added.

StepUP helps more than 500 people a year move to self-sufficiency, and leaders of the program see it as more than a band-aid. "We are seeing people changing their lives," Swayne said. Last year StepUP placed 175 ex-offenders in jobs. "That's 175 people who are not going back into the system."

Goals of the ministry

StepUP is an official nonprofit with a program aimed at providing people second chances in education, employment and housing. A successful student will graduate from the program with a stable job, home and family. Ninety percent of the people who enter the program do not have jobs, Swayne said. StepUP teaches them how to create a resume, how to dress for a job, the importance of arriving on time for appointments, how to handle conflicts and how to manage themselves socially. The first step for many participants is to overcome a belief that they cannot succeed and build their self-confidence that has been destroyed through past experiences.

The program graduates about 80 percent of the people it trains. In 2008, StepUP placed more than 200 people in jobs, Swayne said. Job holders sign contracts that say they will stay on their job a year. A year after starting their jobs, 80 percent were still working there. Remaining on the job leads to another step. Workers who successfully complete this part of the program are eligible for a nine-month life skills program. During the 36 weeks, participants get 12 weeks of budgeting, 12 weeks of career and credit lessons, and 12 weeks of relationship and home ownership education. They can apply for housing and for educational scholarships.

"It's a tough-love program," Swayne said of the every-other-week classes. "Tough" means that a student arriving late for class cannot attend that day but can return in two weeks if they choose to come back. The same rule applies if students arrive for class wearing inappropriate clothes. Participants can take advantages of special incentives, or bonuses, if they complete each step. "If you show up on time for class, you get a bonus. If you complete a class, you get a bonus," Swayne said. The bonuses accumulate throughout the 36 weeks, and students receive them when they finish the program.

Funding the ministry

In fiscal year 2007, StepUP's total annual income was \$700,000, with 35 percent of the budget coming from a Community Fund grant; 21 percent from individuals; 13 percent from congregations; 10 percent from foundations; and 9 percent from corporations.

MORE ON BACK

Recruiting volunteers

StepUP has about 200 volunteers with 65 actively engaged at any one time. It requires mentors for both adults and children; people to prepare meals for their programs; people to help with children's events; employers who can offer job opportunities; drivers who can take participants to appointments or job interviews; heavy lifters to help move donated furniture and household items; physicians and other medical professionals; and guidance counselors to provide care. "We get after it," Swayne said of volunteer recruitment activities. "We tell people in churches and corporations about the program."

Structure of the program

People interested in enrolling in the program first attend a weeklong orientation. They must be 21 or older and have the desire to become self-sufficient. Orientation includes a general meeting on the first day, followed by a skills assessment interview with staff. Participants also attend a series of workshops about communication skills, conflict resolution, reflective listening, dressing for success, interviewing for a job, and job retention. Candidates must attend all meetings and pass a standardized, point-rated evaluation of their interest and commitment in the program. Entrants must complete one step successfully before they can take another. Incentives both motivate them and reward the behavior that leads to fiscal responsibility, healthy relationships, and spiritual growth. The goal is to produce graduates who live in safe, affordable housing and have a stable job with a future.

Promoting the program to the community

Brochures, emails, annual reports and a twice-yearly printed newsletter all help to make people in Raleigh and Wake County aware of the StepUP program. But one of the most comprehensive ways of delivering the ministry's message comes through its Web site, www.step-up.us, where news is reported quickly and archives, including annual reports, are available to anyone interested in learning more.

Program as evangelism

"We are a faith-based staff and are all Christ-followers," Swayne noted of the 10-person StepUP staff. "We do not demand that of the people we serve. We do pray before every meeting. We have a reflection time during which people are invited to share. If they don't want to share, they don't have to."

By: Barabara Elmore

Stepping Stones

Brief descriptions of how to implement specific ministries. For each of the five broader areas above, many ministries can be envisioned. We have identified a few of these for each area and have articulated the steps for how that ministry might be planned.

Backpacks

The Walking Alongside Web site provides a Backpack of additional resources and examples for this specific ministry. Included are published articles, Web sites, selected books, testimonials and existing ministries with contact information.

Food for the Journey

A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.

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