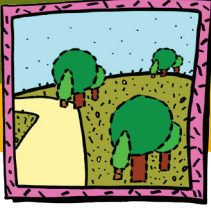


PATHWAY

WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries



» Profile: Adult Literacy Ministry «

» ADULT LITERACY MINISTRY – FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, NACOGDOCHES, TX

As is so often the case with community ministries, it was one person getting excited about a possibility that led to a program that now serves some 250 people annually.

When Robin Feistel and her husband, Bob, joined First Baptist Church of Nacogdoches in 1989, there were about 500 people actively attending worship services. They saw many familiar faces as a large proportion of the members was associated with Stephen F. Austin State University, where Bob teaches math.

The church had a long history of involvement in ministry with internationals that Robin hoped to revive with an ESL ministry. She discussed the idea with the church staff, surveyed the congregation to assess the interest level, and made a formal proposal to the church to re-establish an ESL ministry – but this time using volunteer teachers from various churches. Called HOPE (Helping Others Practice English), the proposal was approved, and the ministry began in January 1991.

Goals of the ministry

The proposal included clear outcomes for the ministry, which help guide decisions and keep administrators and volunteers focused. For First Church of Nacogdoches, the goals are:

To help meet the needs of the INTERNATIONAL:

- + discover new friendships,
- + learn and improve English,
- + develop creative skills,
- + gain a better understanding of American culture and customs,
- + gain a better understanding of worldwide cultures,
- + learn about Christianity from caring friends.

To enrich the lives of CHRISTIANS:

- + form friendships with persons of other countries and cultures,
- + gain a better understanding of worldwide cultures,
- + provide the opportunity for Christians to meet the needs of Internationals through a ministry of concern in the name of Christ.

It is through the lives of Christian teachers and workers that Internationals will gain their best understanding of Jesus Christ and Christianity. By showing our love and concern for the International and their family, we reflect God's love. By showing God's love through our actions, there will be opportunities to share our faith in spoken words.

We believe that the ideal sharing situation is the one established in trust and understanding between two friends. In this meaningful relationship, pressure must be non-existent.

HOPE must be a project of prayer. Each contact that is made must be made in the spirit of love and divine guidance of the Holy Spirit. May ours be a love that expresses itself not only in words but in deeds. May we always remember that our lives may be the only example of Christian love that our international friend will know.

Funding the ministry

The church agreed to provide the funding for the ministry through its Missions budget. Additionally funding was increased in the Nursery budget to pay the child care workers. On occasion, other money is donated to provide for Bibles, special student needs or specific resources. The ministry began with a \$1,200 budget in 1991; its budget in January 2008 is \$4,800.

MORE ON BACK

» Profile: Adult Literacy Ministry «

Recruiting volunteers

Volunteers from the host church family are recruited by bulletin inserts, Power Point presentations, videos and display and recruitment tables. The first semester, all of the English teachers were volunteers from First Baptist, but the church envisioned the program as a way for many churches to serve together. First Baptist invited other churches to participate by personal contacts with church leadership and bulletin inserts about the ministry. Local churches responded to the invitation, and by 2007 the program had an average of 35 volunteers from five churches and three denominations.

Instructors do not have to be certified or speak a language other than English. They receive training initially and are offered other training opportunities throughout the semester. Two-hour classes are offered during the day and one evening of the week.

Structure of the program

Students' level of English proficiency is assessed when they register so they may be placed in the appropriate class. A placement test adapted from the current textbook evaluates the student's English oral, written and reading skills.

In addition to offering English classes, the church offers citizenship classes for those with intermediate-to-advanced English abilities when there is demand and teachers are available.

In order to accommodate the needs of both students and workers, free child care is provided. Nursery-aged children are cared for by paid workers, but school-age children are cared for by volunteers. When the volunteers have the skills and availability to organize a children's program, they offer ESL, a Bible story, tutoring and homework assistance, crafts, refreshments and recreational activities.

Promoting the program to the community

To promote the HOPE program in the community, the groups sends flyers to public school students in ESL and bilingual classes, letters to all former students, articles in area English and Spanish newspapers, community calendars on TV, flyers to ethnic restaurants.

Most of the students are immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries and some from Asia, Europe and the Middle East. The program serves all ages, but the majority of the students are young adults in their 20s and 30s. Many of the participants work in local manufacturing or service industries or on ranches and farms. Other students, however, are professors, spouses or students associated with the university.

Program as evangelism

Students do not have to adhere to the Christian faith to participate in the classes but the volunteers believe it is important to share their faith, and they are encouraged to include a Biblical reference or thought in each lesson and pray with their students. During break time, Bible stories and Christian songs are shared in addition to elements of American culture.

Through their involvement with HOPE, volunteers seek to form friendships with people from other countries and cultures and develop a more global perspective of God's creation while sharing the love of Christ. Volunteers hope to provide a place for immigrants to discover new friendships, learn or improve their English, and feel loved and valued.

In the last 15 years, more than 2,000 students have been served by this program. Volunteers have seen students progress in their English and have helped several students become U.S. citizens. Some students have made professions of faith, and many have become members of local Spanish-speaking churches.

By Sam Oakley, MDiv/MSW 2007