

## Helping Hands

*Asbury United Methodist program reaches out to neighborhood children*

By JANE ALDRED  
LUBBOCK AVALANCHE—JOURNAL

Until recently, many of Asbury United Methodist Church's neighbors thought the church had shut down and the building was up for sale.

Now the 77-year-old church is finding new life by reaching out to children with the Shalom Program, an after-school homework assistance and enrichment program.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, first- through sixth-graders from Dupre Elementary School cross the street to the church after school and work with volunteer tutors, pastor Louise Schock said.

"We are doing what we are called to do," Schock said. "This is a way for our facilities to be used in the week. It's completely free for the children and parents."

The children are given snacks from the South Plains Food Bank, have a playtime and do their homework and reading activities with the help of volunteers until 5 p.m. when their parents pick them up, Schock said.

Since the program began in April, the group has grown from 15 to 80 children, Schock said.



Sara Luna, age 8, hones her math skills at the Shalom After School Program at Asbury United Methodist Church, which is run by donations from the church and staffed with church volunteers.

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Arnold Fernandez, 8, left, and Augie Medrano, 5, read together at the Shalom After School Program, the second Shalom program to be organized in Lubbock and the third in the South Plains.

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Esther Moses, director of the program, said Shalom has been a success because organizers first asked the community what was needed.

"We tried to find out who are the people who live here and tried to get to know the community," Moses said. "They found a place for children. The children were cared for, and it's a safe place."

Part of the nationally based program, Shalom began as a response by the United Methodist Church to the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The church established shalom zones, or peaceful places, in the city to enrich the lives of

children.

"They realized there was a need in the community for healing and outreach," Schock said.

There are two other Shalom churches in the area – Forrest Heights United Methodist in Lubbock and another in Midland – but since each looks at the specific needs of that community, each program is different, she said.

The effort to get to know the community began last year when Asbury members held a vacation Bible study and began going on neighborhood walks to meet the area's residents, Schock said.

"We already had a relationship with Dupre Elementary School, so we re-established that," she said. "The school has been here as long as the church has."

The children are tutored according to age by volunteers, many of whom are retired schoolteachers or college students, Schock said.

"We have about six children per volunteer, but we'd like to have less than that," she said. "We had to turn people away this year because we didn't have enough volunteers."

D'Aun Tavenner, chairwoman of the board of directors and a retired schoolteacher, said whoever wants to work with a small group of children is welcome to be a volunteer.

"Anyone can do this. They just have to be willing," Tavenner said.

Many of the church's congregation members have donated supplies, time and money to the program, Schock said.



Bethany Minienta, 6, whistles as she and other students from Dupree Elementary School head into the Shalom After School Program, across the street from the school.

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Maris Quintanilla, 11, right, talks about her book in her class while Jennifer Garcia, 11, looks on in the Shalom program at Asbury United Methodist Church in Lubbock. The program is an after-school program for children.

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"The church has about 170 members, about 100 of whom still actively attend Sunday morning services," Schock said. "A large number of our congregation are elderly and are unable to attend services."

Recently, the congregation decided to re-establish a youth group in the church, and several children from Shalom now regularly attend Sunday-school services, Schock said.

The additions are healthy and part of the church's mission, she said.

"The neighborhood has changed in 77 years," she said. "The residents are more transient, and the housing is more rental. There are still a number of elderly who live here and college students and first-time home owners. The language has changed, too, and there are a number of people who speak Spanish."

Moses and Schock said they are happy with what the program has done.

"We don't do it for the community; we build on the community's assets," Schock said. "I think that people have strengths and gifts to give. It's about the love they have for their family."

Volunteer and grandparent Lupe ManRiquez said all five of her grandchildren are enrolled this fall.

"I just love it," she said. "This community didn't have anything for years. My grandkids just love it, and I'm just so proud to be in it."

The children, ages 6 to 11, have more pride in school now because the tutoring helps them understand their homework better, ManRiquez said.

"For those two days, I don't have to worry about helping them with their homework," she said. "This is just so wonderful for the children. They meet with other children and tell them about Shalom."

One of her grandchildren, Gabby ManRiquez, is a 6-year-old first-grader. Gabby said that although she doesn't have to do homework yet, she likes the Shalom program.

"I like the snacks and my teacher," said.

Zakira Cage, a 13-year-old fourth-grader, said she too likes the food, but she really appreciates how much it has improved her school work.

"It has helped me a lot," Cage said. "I used to just play when I got home. This is something to do."

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### **Shalom After School Program**

- What: Free after-school tutoring and reading program for children in first through sixth grades from Dupre Elementary School.
- Where: Asbury United Methodist Church.
- Funding: By donations; run by volunteers from the church and community.
- Enrollment: About 80 children.
- Information: 762-0829.