

Shalom

Partnership educates children, reinvigorates Methodist church

By Beth Pratt
A-J Religion Editor

Historically, as central city neighborhoods change, churches either change or go into decline.

For many churches, the option has been move or die.

Asbury United Methodist Church, 2005 Ave. T, is among those once-thriving congregations that have wrestled with how to reinvent themselves without moving or dying. Average age of members is in the 70s, but the 75-year-old church has opted for change, opening its doors to Hope Community of Shalom.

Hebrew for peace, shalom is the name attached to a United Methodist initiative to assess needs and minister within inner-city neighborhoods.



Robin O'Shaughnessy / A-J Photo

Titus Padilla, 6, puts the puzzle together to spell Shalom, which has the students' names on the letters. He is a member of Shalom Readers, an after-school program at Asbury United Methodist Church.

"God has worked a miracle for Asbury," said member Nancy Clopton in an open letter to the congregation in the Feb. 9 issue of Echoes, the weekly church newsletter.

Noting the financial challenges of a shrinking congregation, Clopton said, "The church is at the point that it might have been closing its doors. But God sent a vision to the congregation that we should reach out to the neighborhood with the Shalom ministry."

People came with the right gifts and knowledge, sent by God at the optimum moment, she said, among them the Rev. Louise Schock, pastor of Asbury since 2001; Esther Moses, with the Lubbock Inter-Ethnic Parish; D'Aun Tavnener, wife of a former pastor and longtime member; Lupe Manriquez, a neighborhood grandmother who lives near the church and is rearing nine grandchildren; and several volunteers from other churches.

"God continues to bring support from many others who are catching the vision of what Hope Community of Shalom can mean for Lubbock, Clopton said.

"The building will bloom once again with the voices of people who will feel God's loving care for them through the service of this grand old building now situated exactly where need is great," she said.

The vision became reality with the signing of papers Feb. 20, transferring the building and equipment to the Hope Community of Shalom Inc.

Schock credited the Rev. Dave Treat, who retired in 2001, with starting the process. The church, which is directly across the street from Dupre Elementary School, still has the voices of children echoing through its halls in a Tuesday and Thursday after-school program called Shalom Readers, which is directed by Esther Moses.

Andrew Tolbert, new executive director of the Hope Community of Shalom, is excited about the possibilities for the neighborhood. The retired career Air Force officer said he grew up in a family that attained lower middle class status through the hard work of his father, who was not well educated. As he got out into the world, Tolbert said, he began to realize that education gap affected not only his father, but also his view of the world, "much that I didn't realize I didn't know."



Robin O'Shaughnessy / A-J Photo

Esther Moses directs the Shalom Reader program, a part of Hope Community of Shalom Center at Asbury United Methodist Church



**Robin O'Shaughnessy /
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At 89, Lucille Tune is the oldest among volunteers who come to Asbury United Methodist Church from 3 to 5 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays to work with Shalom Readers. Participants come from Dupre Elementary School across the street to snack, play and do homework.

With most of his 23 years of military service in supervisory positions, Tolbert said he was "constantly reminded of what kids from poor neighborhoods and families are missing in the educational area."

That is not meant as criticism of schools so much as recognition that educated parents help schools with the educational process for their children, he said.

Reading provides a window on the world that will help children overcome educational gaps within their families and provide values that will enlarge their vision for themselves, he added. Thus, the work of Shalom Readers is a critical need in the community the program serves.

Volunteers range in age from the traditional college student at Texas Tech to the oldest volunteer, music teacher Lucille Tune, 89, who played piano accompaniment as one group of children sang "Itsy, Bitsy Spider," led by a student from Sunset International Bible Institute.

Jean Lewis Kock has worked with first- and second-graders since Moses began Shalom Readers at Asbury in 2002 as a trial program.

"We started with six kids," Kock said. "I think this is an absolutely incredible program. We offer snacks, supper and individual attention ... with a big emphasis on reading."

Kock brings her own books for the children to read as well as books from the library. The children enjoy the volunteers reading to them, and also the 10 minutes when they do their silent reading of books, she said.

A walk-through with Moses on a Tuesday afternoon found children doing their homework, proudly showing Moses their good grades on school papers or playing games.

Mary Jo Sanders, a retired schoolteacher and substitute teacher for children with dyslexia at the Scottish Rites program, sat with three fourth-graders who were completing their homework. Shalom Readers provides one-on-one attention.

"All of these students are good readers," Sanders said of the three fourth-graders, who were doing some work on spelling.

Sidney Thomas was the runner-up in the spelling bee at Dupre, Sanders added proudly.

"He's a good singer, too," she said, noting that he was a member of the MLK Boys Choir, as he modestly ducked his head, a bit embarrassed but also pleased at the attention.

Speaking for himself, Sidney likes playing outdoor games, especially metal tag, a variant of wood tag because Asbury has a metal fence instead of wood, the teacher explained.

Stephanie George likes having help with her homework at Shalom Readers. Ryan Thorne agrees with Sidney that games are his favorite activity.

Sixth-grader Anthony Vela, who has attended the program two years, also appreciates the help with homework.



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Cydnee Prince, 15, plays guitar with others at Loaves & Fishes, a food and clothing distribution program in the basement of Asbury United Methodist Church.

"I like to sing in the MLK Boys Choir," he added.



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From left, Gabriella Manriquez, 9, Deionne Garza, 8, Valerie Rodriguez, 9, and Savannah Farrias, 9, take a break from homework to clown a bit at Shalom Readers.

Jackie Montoya, a retired teacher who taught at Dupre, is a member of Lubbock's First United Methodist Church. She volunteers with the Shalom Readers because she is well aware of the needs in the neighborhood.

"I still know the families, and I think (the children) need a safe place where they can have fun, have supervision while learning to relate to each other and to grown-ups," Montoya said.

When Schock retired from her position as conference director of mission and administration,

she accepted the assignment as part-time pastor at Asbury, bringing with her a knowledge of the Shalom movement as well as expertise in where to find funding.

"That is the church I attended while on conference staff, and the church knew me because I had preached there," Schock said. "I had co-chaired the Shalom ministry team until I came on as pastor."

But her knowledge of the Shalom program went even deeper because she was present at the 1992 General Conference that originated the concept of a neighborhood ministry.

"We took a day of fasting and prayer," she recalled of that first program, developed in hopes of preventing a climate that makes a neighborhood ripe for rioting. "It was started in Los Angeles as a Shalom Zone - churches working with individuals, other institutions and agencies within the community to see how they could address the needs of that community."

The program is part of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries.

"That was in May '92," Schock said. "It started in L.A. and has reached out throughout the U.S.A. because it was working there."

Today, churches in Africa and other countries have adopted it.

"(Shalom) is not something to do for people, but to do with people," Schock said. "It is asking, 'What is it we need in our community?'"

The program began with a five-month training period with trainers coming from the United Methodist Church's General Board.

"That first summer, Esther and I walked the neighborhood, met the people and did a Bible school through the Inter-Ethnic Parish," Schock said.

Moses expects having the church building as property of the Shalom program will work well.

"It gives us opportunity to expand and bring in more people, but Asbury will still be involved in missions," Moses said.

The ladies of Asbury who make cookies and sew costumes started the Shalom mission, Moses said.

"I tell them, 'You planted this seed.'"

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