

2:10 - Open with Video from District Conference

11 minute presentation, with pause or video promotion at slide 22:

Slide 1: Good afternoon, my name is Mary Lewis Dassinger, project coordinator for 200,000 More Reasons. Rev. Sam Meadors joins me as the Delta Project Community Coordinator. We are grateful for the opportunity to share about 200,000 More Reasons.

Slide 2: I have often cried-- and cried OUT to God this past year; I doubt I am alone in this. For as many times as I have cried out in frustration and weariness, I have also given thanks and praise for the work of 200,000 More Reasons -- that it unites us in mission-- for your faithfulness in wanting to help Arkansas' children and for God's timeliness. We are prepared to respond to the devastating effects the pandemic has had on the poorest families in our communities.

Slide 3: Last year, we announced we would be inviting you to do more in your community. In expanding our focus for long-term stability, we have 3 EFFECTIVE strategies for addressing poverty. Nutrition, literacy and stability—are pathways of HOPE in the midst of suffering; opportunity in the midst of scarcity; and LIGHT in the midst of darkness.

Slide 4: And, we must do more! The Arkansas Center for Health Improvement stated that suicides were up 41% since 2000, with "risks exacerbated by the pandemic."

A report based on 2020 census data from by Save the Children, states that

- 2/3's of American families have difficulty making ends meet
- 3 in 4 families report symptoms of anxiety, half report issues with depression

Slide 5: Also, over half of families say their children are spending less time learning And, the poorest families have had the hardest time with Covid, mainly because of the lack of resources.

Slide 6: Feeding America estimates that more than 200,000 children in AR went hungry this past year; we have lost all gains in alleviating food insecurity since 2014.

Slide 7: Nevertheless, YOU have held Christ's light up for others by responding to the overwhelming need for food, either by creating or expanding feeding ministries.

Slide 8: Please read the pre-conference journal report which provides a more complete picture of the impact you have made this past year, including the 31 mobile distributions funded by the Methodist Foundation of Arkansas which provided essential access to food around the delta.

Make sure to watch the video on our website featuring St. James United Methodist Church in Pine Bluff.

Slide 9: Our goal remains to have 100% of AR United Methodist churches involved in feeding ministries to children. If your church does not have or support a feeding ministry, make it your goal to be counted this year. Visit our website for resources and ways to get started.

Slide 10: Children also need stability in their lives to thrive. Pre-Covid, Arkansas already had high rates of substance abuse, including opioid use, and some of the lowest rates of access to mental health programs. Imagine how urgently this access is needed now!

Stresses, even small ones, piled on top of stresses, can be traumatic for children and adults. Simply not knowing IF there will be any food for the weekend--is enough to create a traumatic experience. Trauma after trauma is devastating. But unlike many of us, these under-resourced children and their families do not have access or the financial means to get help.

Slide 11: We know that you all engage some of the neediest in your community through your feeding ministries. What more can you do?

You may already host AA or Al-Anon or grief support and divorce care ministries. What would it look like to invite the families that visit your food pantry or blessing box to join?

Could you start something new, such as a support group for grandparents raising grandkids or for single moms? If you were to ask what they wish the church could do for them, many will most likely just want to share what they are going through and need to know they are not alone. You will find much in common – struggles with caring for aging parents, financial stress, worries over personal health, parenting teenagers or special needs kids for instance.

200,000 More Reasons has established a Mental Health Task Force to help guide us as we develop resources and training opportunities. For example, we will be hosting conversations on making referrals to a professional therapist or hospital as well as ministry models that offer assistance around mental and emotional health. Our website and facebook page already offer research, training opportunities and more. Be creative and bold by inviting people from your community into ministries, not just your church family.

Slide 12 – I want to invite Sam to speak now about our focus on literacy. She is doing much of this work in the delta and around Project Transformation.

Slide 13: Thank you, Mary Lewis. 200K More Reasons has a big goal for our conference when it comes to literacy. We want 50% of our churches offering on-site or partnership reading ministries that include food distribution. For the 86% of congregations already doing some form of feeding hungry children, including literacy ministry can be a logical next step.

Slide 14: In 2019 reading proficiency improved from 69% of students to 62%. Whatever these scores will look like post-pandemic, it still means that too many children are not reading on grade level. Students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are even more likely to not be reading on grade level by the third grade at 70% below proficient.

Slide 15: Which is important because by the 4th grade, students are no longer learning to read- they are reading in order to learn. If children are struggling with literacy, they will be struggling in all other subject areas as well. They can get frustrated or distracted when comprehending directions or lessons is done through reading. Children struggling with their reading skills may act out in class to avoid reading. These behaviors distract from the real culprit- illiteracy. 85% of all youth who interact with the juvenile court system are functionally low literate according to Literacy MidSouth. Roughly 70% of the entire prison population cannot read above a 4th grade level.

Slide 16: While being illiterate is linked to higher rates of incarceration, increased literacy leads to **higher** high school graduation rates, **higher** college enrollment rates, and **higher** earning potential and future career success. **Therefore, engaging in literacy ministry is a long range plan for alleviating poverty in our communities.**

Slide 17: 200K More Reasons is proposing three ways your congregation can engage in literacy ministry. We have these three ways stair-stepped because we are stepping toward greater relationships with those in our communities. The first way is to increase access to books, then to volunteer with in-school tutoring programs, and lastly to host out of school learning opportunities.

The first way to engage with literacy ministry is through increasing access to books.

Slide 18: You may have seen this statistic- for every child in a middle-income home they have access to roughly 13 age-appropriate books. But in under-resourced communities, there may be only one age-appropriate book for every 300 kids. But we can do something about that.

Slide 19: Increasing access to books can fall along the same line as increasing access to food. At Elm Springs UMC, as they were building a new blessing box, they wanted to include a little Free Library. So, books and food were available to all of the families who stopped by. Primrose UMC in LR has partnered with the Central Arkansas Library system to receive books that are going out of circulation and are hosting pop-up libraries in their community for children to have books to take home. We've made an entire media and information kit available on our website to help you collect and distribute books in your community through Giving Books for Love.

Slide 20: Another way to engage is to connect with your local school through tutoring. Pulaski Heights UMC has been tutoring for a decade in connection with Wakefield elementary. You don't have to be a large congregation either, a small congregation in Benton began tutoring with their local school when their efforts to connect to students in a busy and loud cafeteria during lunch needed to change. The shift to tutoring was welcomed by teachers and volunteers alike.

Slide 21: Finally, you can engage in ministry through out-of-school programs. This can be as simple as adding a book club for kids to your weekly community meal. It could also mean tutoring after school like at the Genesis campus in Fayetteville. Or partnering with other churches and the local library like Altheimer UMC. Paragould First UMC is even offering a week-long reading camp run VBS style for children in the community who might need extra help over the summer such as English as a second language learners.

Slide 22: Another out of school program moving toward launch in Pine Bluff is Project Transformation- a summer day camp focused on literacy and learning staffed by college student interns. This national model with Methodist roots will offer summer learning opportunities to children in under-resourced areas of Pine Bluff.

Now, we want to share with you a preview to 3 video interviews we conducted about literacy programs focused on increasing access with feeding ministries, in-school tutoring, and out of school programs. Listen to the stories from Pulaski Heights, Elm Springs, and Paragould First.

2:00 VIDEO SNIPPETS

Slide 23: Now that you've heard a little bit about these ideas for engaging in literacy ministry in your community, I am sure you want to know more. The full interviews are available on our website. For those of you who are in the room today, you are taking home a postcard from us that reminds you how to connect. For those of you online- and anyone in this room- you can simply open your phone right now and open your camera app to scan this QR code on the screen. Click at the top when prompted to open your internet browser and you'll find the interviews there in their entirety.

Slide 24: If you want to contact either Mary Lewis or myself as you make plans and begin to dream about how you can serve your community through literacy, nutrition or promoting a healthy stable family, our information is provided both on the slide here and on the website.

Mary Lewis: This concludes our report, Bishop.