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# Fort Smith Ministry Spreads Joy Through Handcrafted Cards

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The Caring Through Cards Ministry meets every Wednesday night and handcrafts about 90 cards in one hour.

By Caleb Hennington

Digital Content Editor



There's something special about getting a handmade card in the mail. Whether it's wishing you a happy birthday, a family portrait during Christmas, a Get Well Soon card if you're feeling under the weather, or a Just Thinking of You card that can brighten up your day, there's a certain feeling of nostalgia and warmth in receiving a message the old way that can't be replicated through a text or an email.

That special feeling is one of the many reasons that First UMC Fort Smith started their Caring Through Cards ministry, a Wednesday night program where volunteers handcraft cards for their community.

"The Caring Through Cards class is part of our Wednesday Night Life program, which lasts about nine weeks in both the spring and the fall," said Kelly DeSoto, a member of Fort Smith First and a card maker who started the class a few years ago.

"Each night, our class tries to make about 90 handmade cards in one hour, sometimes more, sometimes fewer depending on how many volunteers we have that night," DeSoto said.

First Fort Smith's Wednesday Night Life is a program that meets weekly on Wednesday nights. On a typical night, people gather at the church and everyone begins the night by taking communion and then eating a meal together. Then, they split off into their selected groups to take part in that night's class activities.

In the Caring Through Cards class, participants work on a specific card design each night. A sample design of the card is shown to everyone, and then they get to work making their cards. DeSoto said a little bit of prep work is done before the class, such as cutting shapes out of paper, but everyone is given their own tools and supplies to complete the project.

The idea for the cards ministry originally began as a way to stay in touch with the 80 and over members of the church, including those who are shut-ins, are in nursing homes, or have trouble making it to church on a regular basis. The church wanted to find a way to continue reaching that age group when more modern ways of communication weren't always a possibility.

"We started out sending cards just for the holidays, like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's, Easter, and so on," DeSoto shared.

They've now incorporated their congregational care plan into the program as well, and make Sympathy and Thinking of You cards that can be sent out to more than just their octogenarian-plus members. All together, the class sends out about 180 cards each time they celebrate a holiday or event.



Handmade cards made by the Caring Through Cards ministry.

DeSoto said that since starting the program about three or four years ago, they have doubled the number of volunteers who come out to the church each week to make cards.

DeSoto began the class with one other person from the church, Gail Oakes, and that first year they had 12 people participate in the class.

As they've grown, they've added more leaders, and currently, DeSoto and Oakes, as well as the Rev. Janice Sudbrink and Jeanne Starr, lead the class on Wednesday nights.

Oakes, who works on staff at First UMC, is responsible for not just preparing the card materials and designs, but creating the list of 80 and older members and others who will receive the cards once they are mailed out.

The cards are hand-addressed and stamped when sent out, and Oakes says they do this rather than run it through a postage machine to make the cards feel even more personal.



According to DeSoto, it isn't just older women who participate in the crafting; they have a range of different age groups, as well as both men and women who participate in the class.

"It's really enjoyable to see not just the women, but the men get really into the crafting as well!" DeSoto said.

Although the coronavirus pandemic has no longer made it possible for the class to meet in person, DeSoto said they have enough cards to last through July 4th. They are hoping to be able to get everything back to normal and continue making cards again once the pandemic has settled down and churches are allowed to gather in person.

For DeSoto, Oakes and the other volunteers in the Caring Through Cards ministry, it's not simply about creating cards and sending them off; it's another way that they've been able to make connections and share the love of Christ with those who are no longer able to make it outside their homes to worship.

"Each night that we have class, we start the night by reading thank you cards that we've gotten from people who we've sent our cards to," Oakes said. "We do it so our volunteers know what this means to these people ... because sometimes, that's the only mail they get.

"We let them know that no matter what age you are, you're thought about. Somebody loves you."

For more information on the Caring Through Cards ministry, contact Fort Smith First UMC at [fsfumc@fsfumc.org](mailto:fsfumc@fsfumc.org) or Gail Oakes at [goakes@fsfumc.org](mailto:goakes@fsfumc.org).