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WiFi Grants Offer Churches a Chance to Become Community Hubs

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Technical difficulties. Connectivity issues. What once was a minor inconvenience can be a major struggle in a time when so much of our academic, social, and work lives are spent connecting over the internet.

Judy Hall, the pastor of a three-point charge in Logan County, has seen her fair share of difficulty getting connected. The rural communities she serves do not all have the same access to high-speed internet. She often must choose which office at which church, or at home, will best suit her needs for virtual meetings.

Recently, she's begun to take into consideration another issue: bandwidth. As kids and parents gather at picnic tables outside to use the church's WiFi to submit assignments and access schoolwork, she knows it is not only the pastor who needs to stay connected. Pastor Judy and her congregations recognize how important internet access is when it comes to learning.

Access to the internet and internet-enabled devices is a factor of both infrastructure and income. In some places, particularly in rural communities or outside of city limits, physical technology is not in place to enable internet connection. At other times a family's budget simply cannot stretch to afford the cost of internet. Both of these mean that a student's likelihood to have access to broadband internet is directly correlated to their household's income, location, and race.

There is a growing divide between those who have access to the internet to be able to complete their schoolwork and others without. Those without will likely fall further behind in school. This divide is known as the digital divide, or the homework gap.

This gap isn't new. Educators and advocates have been drawing attention to the discrepancies in access to educational technology for nearly 20 years. The digital divide that was present before the pandemic has only been exacerbated because of the ongoing public health crisis. Today, being able to access quality internet is no longer optional, it is a necessity.

For students to meet their learning goals, to reach their God-given potential, they need to be able to connect to their teachers, school, and schoolwork. This is where churches can step in.

200K More Reasons has partnered with the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas to provide Virtual Learning Support grants to a limited number of churches. These grants can expand churches' networks to allow them to minister to children and families, like those in Logan County, who need a safe place to access the internet.

The Foundation is providing a total of \$25,000 in grants, with \$2,000 available for each individual congregation.

Churches can offer internet access in their parking lot and expand to indoor gathering spaces as guidelines allow. Many of our churches are already a hub for resources in their community. This grant will allow congregations to offer another service that perhaps is going unmet.

In Fayetteville, Trinity United Methodist Church recognizes that their neighborhood is in need. The church already provides a food pantry to an area where two in five people are living under the poverty line. Each week, food pantry patrons ask volunteers about the progress of internet availability in the parking lot. With this grant, Trinity hopes to be able to provide for their community sooner rather than later.

If your congregation would like to apply or if you'd like to learn more, visit the [200K More Reasons](#) page on arumc.org and click the link for [Virtual Learning Grants](#). If your congregation is already providing internet access to your community, let us know. You can register your public WiFi access point through the University of Arkansas's Public WiFi map [here](#).

With so many challenges facing learners this year, my prayer is that we can all work together to provide safe places and spaces for students to learn.

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