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Building the Kingdom of God Through Small Community Libraries

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Bishop Mueller reads to kids at the Alzheimer Library.

By Rev. Sam Meadors

Community Coordinator, The Delta Project - 200K More Reasons

"The opposite of poverty is not property. The opposite of both poverty and property is community." Jürgen Moltmann, German Theologian

The library isn't even open yet, but kids are arriving. They come in groups; some are dropped off by their designated grown-up, others arriving on bicycles, still more walking up to the doors. In Altheimer, a small, rural community in Jefferson County, the library has become the place to be for children who are out of school for the summer.

Like many changing communities, there is no longer a school in town. Come fall, students will ride the bus on a long route to get to Pine Bluff, roughly 15 miles away. While the school has food, summer programs, and events, the kids aren't going because during the summer the bus doesn't run. So, the library it is.

You could not ask for a better library. Or a better librarian. If the library is the heart of the community in summer, Mrs. Melony is the heart of the library. She greets every child by name before making sure they have a mask and hand sanitizer. She has candy, chips, and granola bars behind her desk when the kids need an extra snack. She knows what games they like to play on the PlayStation and what grade everyone is going into in the fall. Mrs. Melony is the reason that any kids came at all when the church wanted to provide a literacy program.

Mrs. Melony called all the parents and began sharing the news. She told everyone to get registered for the summer program only lasting a few weeks. Even though the program was full to overflowing, she made sure that kids could still stay at the library even if they were on the waiting list. There are 18 children coming to the library every day; some to read with tutors, some to read alone, and all to be fed.

Two years ago, as 200K Reasons was adding more reasons including literacy and family stability, the local pastor, the Rev. Lance Hickerson, asked if he could get some books to give away. He got more than he asked for when instead of just books, he was met with the opportunity to support a reading program for children in the community. There was worry, though, because Altheimer UMC is a small church and might not be able to provide all the volunteers needed for such a program.

Instead of backing down, the church teamed up with locals. First with the office of the mayor and then with churches from neighboring communities. Arkansas Kids Reads, a literacy nonprofit, offered training and oversight from their expertise. Churches from White Hall, St. James, and Lakeside provide tutors for an hour each day, reading one-on-one with two students. Then, a literacy specialist instructs the class in learning for another hour. But wait, there's more!



Children receive meals provided by the Arkansas Foodbank Summer Feeding Program and prepared at a Lakeside United Methodist Church in Pine Bluff. Interns from Quad W at First United Methodist of Pine Bluff deliver the meals. Anyone under the age of 18 can visit one of three locations in Watson Chapel, Altheimer and Wabbaseka.

There is a small army of volunteers that have decided that children need support. They are using time that would otherwise go to their own families, their jobs, or their retirement to help children who, until a few weeks ago, they did not know. Now that they have a taste for it, they are already talking about next summer and even more importantly this fall.

In building a community, we get to witness small glimpses of the kingdom of God. That is what is happening through reading and feeding this summer in Altheimer, Arkansas. Thanks be to God!

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