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RELIGION

Hunger targeted in Hobart

Oklahoma churches focusing on hungry in their communities

Churches are encouraged to focus on providing food for the hungry in their communities; much like First United Methodist Church of Hobart has done for two years.

Oklahoma City metro-area churches are being encouraged to focus on children at risk for hunger this month.

The Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives and Cornerstone Assistance Network have joined to host Season of Service, a public awareness campaign encouraging houses of worship to pay heed to issues affecting their communities.

No doubt many congregations already are addressing the needs of those who might go hungry without some sort of assistance. Others may benefit from the Season of Service campaign that brings the subject of hunger to the forefront.

A church in Hobart knows a thing or two about this issue.

Two years ago, leaders at First United Methodist Church of Hobart applied to be a part of the Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma's Summer Feeding Program, which provides free lunches to school-age children during summer. Bob Shaw, the church's lay leader, said when church members found out they missed the deadline to be a part of the program, they decided to create one.

The church raised funds to offer free summer meals to Hobart-area children who qualify for the federal government's free and reduced-price lunch program. Shaw said volunteers served 412 meals to youths that summer.

The program is going strong this summer, again without inclusion in the food bank program. Shaw said if the church had been part of the program, volunteers could use food distributed by the food bank.

Shaw said the Hobart congregation's church council leaders discussed the issue, and one leader described their decision in a nutshell. "She said, 'How can we not feed the children?' We didn't even vote. That closed the debate on it right there," he said.

One unexpected bonus of the church's successful program is an award that was presented to church leaders at the annual gathering of the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church in May in Tulsa. Shaw said the summer feeding program was presented one of the "It Worked for Us" awards from the conference's board of laity.

Most of all, the dedicated volunteers who help run the program are pleased that the church can step in and fill a community need.

"It's bittersweet," Shaw said. "It's depressing that there's a need for this, but we're thrilled that we can be here to do something like this."