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COMMUNITY FAITH LEADERS MARK MISSION WORK MILESTONES, EARN 'FACES AND PLACES' DESIGNATION

Uniontown, PA – One of the tenets of almost every religion is helping your fellow man. That help can come in many forms, but here in Fayette County, help and support abound through local churches and the people that comprise them.

Because of their dedication to helping others, both locally and afar, the leaders in our faith-based communities have earned the 'Faces and Places' designation for July.

Kenneth Haines, the pastor at Masontown and Smithfield United Methodist churches, as well as Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church in Dilliner, said doing good works in the community and helping others is "what we're supposed to be about."

Haines and his fellow pastors in the Klondike Clergy Association recently held a mission festival to do just that.

"The main goal is raising some funding for a couple of local missions," Haines said.

One of those missions was the support of an ill 18-month-old child and his family; the other was giving a boost to the Community Kitchen, a Masontown ministry. Haines said the mission festival included live entertainment and children's activities, as well as a basket raffle and a live auction, the proceeds from which went directly to those two causes.

"We were able to have quite a successful day there," he said. "I consider it an extremely successful day. Just the number of organizations that came out and were part of it, and the way the community came together, it was fantastic. It really was."

Haines said all of his churches do mission work within their respective communities, including supporting a women's shelter and the Salvation Army, and local organizations such as libraries and fire departments.

"Personally, I take a mission team from across the conference in the spring and in the fall," he said. "I've been doing that for probably 10 years now," Haines said, noting the team usually visits places that have been struck by natural disasters like floods or severe storms.

Haines' mission team has visited Crisfield, Md., and more recently has been going to North Carolina. It also has been working closer to home, in Rosedale, W.Va.

"That's just giving help to those in need – just help in general, pretty much," he said.

For Pastor Don Henderson of Asbury United Methodist Church in Uniontown, mission work is crucial.

"My personal attitude about ministry is that too many American churches, they're content to come on Sunday morning and sit and put money in the collection plate," he said. "Following Jesus is an active thing. I'm trying to encourage Asbury (parishioners) to get out of the pew."

Henderson has led his congregation pretty far "out of the pew," even traveling across the country last summer to help a fellow church in need. Henderson explained the mission trip came about after a young parishioner became connected with a Native American reservation in Montana.

"A lot of the reservations get support from the casinos, but this one was really poor," he said, noting many of the people on the reservation suffered from substance abuse and other issues. "We got in touch with a little church out there; it was built by a Native American World War II veteran. He had just passed, and they needed some things done badly."

So, Henderson and his wife and other volunteers made the trip to Montana, fixing the church's roof, installing new windows, and repairing ceilings, among other tasks.

"We felt like it was a worthwhile endeavor, and I think those of us who went were probably blessed as much or more than the people we were working for," Henderson said.

Like Haines' congregations, Asbury members also go out into the local community and offer help and support. One parishioner, for instance, works with Connellsville Area Community Ministries, while another volunteers their time at East End United Community Center's after-school program. Still another works with Center for Hope, a Uniontown-based pregnancy center.

"During COVID, we helped with the food bank in Connellsville," Henderson said. "We have a counseling program. Last month, we had 30 counseling sessions here. We also subsidize that for people who can't afford it."

Brownsville Area Ministerial Association (BAMA), too, has helped to provide food for people in need, along with spreading the word to local children.

"Once a month, on the fourth Saturday of the month, we have a food bank," association President Keith Almond said. "It's actually two things. The food we get for the community food bank doesn't come prepared; we have to pack it all. We do that on Friday. On Saturday morning, we actually receive our clients from 9-11 a.m."

BAMA will host a Vacation Bible School from 7-8:30 p.m. Aug. 7-9 at St. Mary's Hall, the recreation center of the Historic Church of St. Peter. Additionally, the association will work with local schools this fall to implement Bible Released Time for elementary and middle school students.

"It's been on the books in Pennsylvania law for about 30 years now," Almond said. "There is a provision in the law, where if you can transport the children to a nearby location, you have an hour to give them Bible instruction."

Almond said a bus company is willing to transport the students free of charge to a nearby church, where they will learn about the Bible from volunteer teachers. Middle school students in the program will attend weekly for three months, while elementary students will go every other week.

This fall, BAMA will also provide support to Food for Falcons, an initiative spearheaded by local elementary school teachers. Food will be packed and given out to children in need on Fridays so that they will have something to eat over the weekend.

Almond said another event on the association's fall schedule is a community prayer service scheduled from 1-6 p.m. Oct. 7 on the amphitheater stage in downtown Brownsville.

All of the outreach programs keep association members busy, but Almond said it is important work. "It's pivotal," he said. "It's the most important work we do."

Whether it be through mission work or outreach efforts, Fayette County is full of faith-based organizations and individuals working to make a positive impact throughout our communities. If you are in need or want to help others in need, check with your community faith leaders about programs in your area.

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