

Project Transformation

A kid on a bicycle rides by Trinity United Methodist Church in Denison, Texas, and waves wildly to Pastor Dan Gurley as he gets out of his car. Rev. Gurley smiles ruefully as he dodges a kid skateboarding in the parking lot and steps over the chalk drawings on the sidewalks leading up to the church. Maintenance and insurance issues nag at the peripheries of his thoughts but are quickly dispelled by a heartening realization: “Our neighborhood kids – most of whom don’t attend church here yet – feel connected enough to want to hang out here. Trinity has become a safe place for them.”

That wasn’t true a few months ago, before Trinity UMC became the tenth program site for Project Transformation (PT) who just celebrated its tenth year of outreach. A **\$20,000 grant from the Texas Methodist Foundation** assisted PT with start-up costs for the expansion to Denison where, in the area adjacent to the church, socioeconomic conditions that place children “at risk” exceed the national average.

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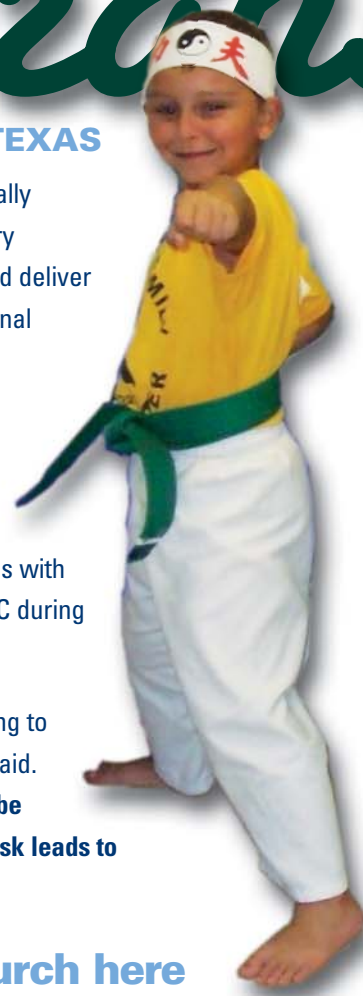
TRINITY UMC, DENISON, TEXAS

Staffed by college interns, PT offers socially conscious leadership training and ministry exploration for the interns who create and deliver health, academic, spiritual, and recreational programming for children and youth in low-income neighborhoods. (Visit www.projecttransformation.org to learn more about this life-changing ministry.) **Jamie Hannan, PT site coordinator,** and seven interns developed relationships with an average of 55 kids a day at Trinity UMC during the eight-week summer day camp.

“Project Transformation was the best thing to happen to us this summer,” Rev. Gurley said. **“I won’t say it wasn’t risky but that may be the most important lesson we learned: risk leads to renewal.”**

Though Trinity’s congregation, led by Outreach Director Sherrie Jackson, already showed a strong heart for mission, some were hesitant when then District Superintendent Fred Durham approached them about becoming a PT site. What would unleashing a slew of boisterous kids on church property for two months do to the noise level and wear and tear on the facilities? Noisy kids, and other inwardly-focused concerns, however, were soon rendered mute by the distinct call of God to love and serve others.

And once they answered that call, there was no stopping them! As Hannan exclaimed, **“I was never told ‘No’ – not ever.** In fact, if I spoke to the congregation about a particular need on Sunday, by Monday or Tuesday we had three times what we



asked for.” The congregation couldn’t do enough to share their abundance: they even arranged to send the entire camp on a field trip to the zoo in nearby Gainesville. Partner churches in surrounding communities responded with overwhelming generosity, as well, providing snacks, supplies, and volunteers.

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As often happens when congregations engage in risk-taking mission, Trinity’s priorities became even more focused on reaching out beyond their inner circle. Resource and renovation decisions supported that priority: a new stove, oven, commercial refrigerator, and freezer were purchased to accommodate PT program needs. A new toddler playground, a refurbished children’s playground, cushions for the sanctuary pews and a large screen projection system – all represent efforts to make the church as inviting as possible to newcomers. Existing outreach ministries are energized, as well: a separate building will be constructed for **Trinity’s Kids Pantry**, a program providing nutritional meals to families with children eligible for the free lunch program.

In his book, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schnase says risk-taking mission and service “presses us to follow Christ into more adventurous encounters with people. As we do so, God’s Spirit changes us, changes others, and changes our churches.”

Positive changes abound as a result of the risk Trinity took in becoming a PT site. Hannan proudly described the progress he observed in some of the more socially awkward children whose anxiety manifested in withdrawn or aggressive behavior. “By the end of the two months, they were all interacting well with others. A grandmother of one of the kids said, ‘This is the best thing that has ever happened to my grandson.’”

When asked about his own development, Hannan said, “I’ve never had to make so many decisions that affected so many people in my entire life. It was exhausting but exhilarating and has deepened my faith. **I’ve seen the power of love transform these kids.**” The interns, too, were given ample opportunity to grow. Hannan instructed them from the beginning to “make this program what you want it to be.” Interestingly, that mirrors

the autonomy Rev. Gurley gave to Hannan and reflects the “permission-giving” rather than “approval seeking” environment Schnase says is a characteristic of churches that engage in risk-taking mission and service.

“It is an honor to partner with programs and churches like Project Transformation and Trinity UMC,” commented **Candy Gross, V.P. of Grants and Investor Services at the Foundation.** “They definitely put our grant dollars to maximum use! **They show how the courage to answer God’s call empowers God’s people with a spirit of abundance that brings about deep change in our communities.”**

