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Plugged in . . . to the future

In the heart of tobacco country, a United Methodist church is helping create a new economic future by providing adult computer training. Some members weren't sure, but most agreed: It's exactly what the church should be doing.

by [Ned Barnett](#)

April 13, 2010

In the 18th century, John Wesley encouraged the opening of Sunday schools to teach illiterate youth. Early in the 21st century, Wesley's spiritual heirs are continuing his passion for education, reshaping it in remarkable new ways in rural eastern North Carolina.

In Greene County, N.C., Calvary Memorial United Methodist Church is helping eliminate a new form of illiteracy -- computer illiteracy.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, Greene County Plugged In -- an innovative program created by the church and others -- provides free computer lessons at the county's senior citizen center in Snow Hill, the county seat. And in a twist that Wesley might find as surprising as the technology, the teachers are young people and the students, their elders. Teenagers trained in computer instruction teach senior citizens during the two weekday sessions. In the winter, they also offer computer guidance to local farmers.

Rosa Williams, 64, is a regular at the training sessions. A Greene County native, she spent her working life in a shirt factory and an electrical-fuse plant and was long baffled by computers. Thanks to the program, she is now at ease with them -- in fact, quite adept.

"I love working with computers," said Williams, who uses the sessions to e-mail her children and surf the Web. In a recent session she watched a fashion video as she shopped for a dress.

"I've learned so much," she said. "I didn't even know how to turn a computer on. I didn't have e-mail." Although Williams doesn't yet have her own computer, she has been giving her children plenty of hints.

Located in Snow Hill, Calvary Memorial started Greene County Plugged In in 2005 with grants from

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The Duke Endowment. Some of the young teachers are church members, but the program is open to all Greene County residents. The county government provides teaching space and helps with the program's administration.

Beyond tobacco

Misty Chase is project director of Beyond Tobacco, a Greene County initiative to diversify and modernize the local economy, which has long depended on tobacco farming. She said the church-sponsored program is helping the county make that transition by opening the world of computers to older residents.

"We've had seniors that were scared to death of computers when they first started," she said. "Now they own their own computers. They can communicate with their family, share photos, read the newspaper. It's improved their quality of life."

The young people who teach the sessions are known as "Digital Connectors" or DCs. They are trained in groups of about 20 during a summer computer camp and work throughout the year for an hourly stipend ranging from \$7 to \$13 per hour. The program has produced more than 100 DCs and provided computer training for more than 600 adults in the county of 21,000 people.

Melinda Suit, 19, a student at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., is in her third year as a DC. An aspiring teacher, she said the program benefits the young people as much as the senior citizens.

"It helps us learn responsibility at a young age and how to communicate with people older than us," she said. "Most young people are afraid to talk to older people. But you get so used to seeing them and they talk to you just like they know you."

Another DC, Abbey Dail, 17, a senior at Greene County Central High School, said teaching adults takes patience but is more fulfilling than teaching her contemporaries.

"They just seem like they're more excited to learn than someone my own age," Dail said.

Calvary Memorial used an initial \$25,000 grant from The Duke Endowment to buy the program's 25

laptop computers and has since renewed the grant three times. The church also sponsored the summer training camps for the Digital Connectors and established a wireless hot spot at its fellowship hall. Even when the hall is closed, the public can come to the adjacent parking lot and get online for free. The county is currently looking for funding to continue the program when the final installment of the grant runs out later this year.

After the flood

Calvary Memorial was prompted to sponsor Plugged In by two related developments. One, Greene County residents realized more and more that they lagged behind the state's urban areas in computer skills and Internet access and needed to take action to bridge that gap. Two, the 300-member church became increasingly aware that it needed to play a direct role in Greene County's economic development.

That latter need became obvious to church members in the devastating floods that covered eastern North Carolina after Hurricane Floyd in 1999. In the immediate aftermath, Calvary Memorial was one of the few facilities still on dry land and still with electricity. It became the center of an interfaith relief effort that raised \$1 million.

As the flood waters receded, the full extent of the storm's damage was exposed. So, too, as never before, was the long-standing gap between rich and poor, whose homes bore the brunt of the flood damage. More than 20 percent of the county's population lives below the poverty line and fewer than one in 10 residents have a bachelor's degree. But even as Greene County struggled to recover from the hurricane, the gap widened. More dependent on tobacco than any other county in North Carolina, Greene County was hit hard as tobacco production plummeted nationwide and federal price supports for tobacco ended.

During that period, the Rev. Claire Clyburn McKeown, Calvary Memorial's pastor from 1998 to 2005, pushed for more public-private cooperation to address the county's needs. In 2000, she helped establish an economic development partnership between churches, the Greene County government, the city of Snow Hill and the local community college. Fostering cooperation became one of Calvary Memorial's top priorities.

Although McKeown was committed to public service, some church members were not. They questioned whether a church should be involved in economic development, particularly a church that was experiencing its own financial struggles.

In the end, enough members agreed the church should help and supported the grant application to The Duke Endowment.

"I'm grateful for those who said, 'Let's see what happens,'" said McKeown, now pastor of Carrboro United Methodist Church in Carrboro, N.C. "It's one thing to pray for justice and it's another to say here's a very particular way in which we can try to create a more just community economically. It's not comfortable. For some it can be a scary thing to do, to confront those differences in a community and admit they exist. But I'm glad we did."

Questions to consider:

- What vision does your organization share with potential partners in your community?
- How well does your church or organization bring together different generations? How can it incorporate an inter-generational focus in your next event or program?
- Calvary Memorial UMC was willing to "push the boundaries of how and whom it serves." In what ways do "how" and "whom" create boundaries for you and your

Not an option

For Mary Betty Kearney, a Calvary Memorial member and former county commissioner, serving the wider community wasn't an option but a necessity.

"A lot of people, sometimes, they're confused about the church being engaged in community activities," she said. "But I think that is exactly what the church should be doing. How else do you lead people to faith and Christianity if you don't engage them? If your church is not a catalyst for your community, then I think it dies."

Fortunately, as Calvary Memorial began reaching out, it found a community ready to be engaged. Others had already taken steps to address the county's problems and were looking for partners to join them.

organization?

- How willing is your church or organization to take risks, to “see what happens” or does it want certainty before proceeding with a given initiative?

Under an ambitious program with Apple Inc., for example, Greene County Schools in 2004 distributed [laptop computers to every student](#) -- about 1,300 -- in grades six through 12. The Greene County government was also working to increase access to the Internet and the presence of computers in Greene County homes. But as the computer revolution moved forward in the schools, adults were being left behind.

“We started thinking, ‘We’ve got to train our farmers. We’ve got to train our parents,’” said Chase, the Beyond Tobacco director. “So that’s when we partnered with Calvary.”

Together, they created Plugged In, patterning it after a program created by One Economy Corporation, a multinational nonprofit organization that promotes technological development in rural areas.

The Rev. James Weaver, McKeown’s successor at Calvary Memorial, was pastor when Greene County Plugged In began and has watched it develop. He agrees that the program has benefitted not only the adults but also the young teachers, boosting their verbal skills and teaching them about leadership. In addition to teaching, the Digital Connectors also design websites for local businesses -- more than 30 so far -- for modest fees that go back into the program.

“I could really see that the young people were being significantly impacted in ways that would help them as they applied to college and later in life,” said Weaver, who in 2009 was appointed pastor of Bethany United Methodist Church in Durham, N.C.

The real connections

Ultimately, what Plugged In is really about -- what it is really connecting -- isn’t computers or the Web but people, said Kearney’s husband, Clarence “Ossi” Kearney, 61.

“It gave children the opportunity to be the teacher rather than the pupil and it also made the older folks more respectful of the knowledge of the younger folks,” said Kearney, a cattle farmer whose roots in the Calvary congregation go back three generations. “There’s not a whole lot of interaction between younger folks and older folks. That sort of happened by accident. I think a lot of these kids bonded with these older people.”

So many different groups have launched various economic development initiatives in Greene County -- computer-related and otherwise -- that it is difficult to parse out specific results and link them back to any particular program. But clearly Greene County is seeing results far more concrete than a narrowed generation gap or a senior citizen’s ability to surf the Web.

Since the county’s schools and churches began fostering computer access and literacy, the teen pregnancy rate has dropped sharply. The rate of high school seniors applying to college has leapt from 24 percent in 2003 to 88 percent in 2009.

But of all the forces that came together to push Greene County into the digital future, one of the most important was Calvary Memorial, said Chase. In pushing its own boundaries and rethinking how and whom it serves, the church helped change a community.

“That congregation was very concerned about the economic well being of this community,” she said. “They recognized that churches need to be part of what’s going on not just on a Sunday basis, but a weekly basis, a day-to-day basis.”

