

# *The Virginia Christian*

*Grant Edition - 11/23*



Grant awarded to Piedmont Ministers Fellowship (a ministry of the Piedmont District Convention).

I received a grant primarily to explore new opportunities in ministry for Pastors and Ministers of the PDC. We met at St. Francis Springs Prayer Center for rejuvenation, discussion around ministry opportunities and new ways of looking at ministry and for prayer. We had a great time and the facility was very accommodating for our needs. Ministers shared their heart for God's people and God's work.

Catina Martin





## Loving Our Neighbors

Grant awarded to Ashland Christian Church to work with refugees/internationals.

Imagine having to leave all your friends, family and the only country you have ever known and come to a foreign land where you don't speak the language, have no money, don't know anyone and only have the clothes on your back. There are more and more refugees finding themselves in this situation that come to the United States lost, alone and scared. This provides us with the unique opportunity to show love to our neighbors even when we can't speak their language. We have taken this to heart at Ashland Christian Church. Last year we partnered with First Baptist Church, Ashland and undertook the mission of helping the refugee and international community. We started an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESL) class and at first it was intimidating for us as volunteers to put ourselves out there, but then we realized that the refugee families are a lot more intimidated than we are. We all worked together to ensure that they felt comfortable to get in our cars and come with us to our church to learn English. Almost immediately friendships began to form, and connections were made especially when we learned that some of their kids were in the same school as our kids. We began with a simple English conversation class which turned into the springboard where many friendships were made.

During one of the classes, one of the students asked why people are putting pumpkins and skeletons on the front porch, and we realized that we need to include a discussion about Halloween and other holidays in our class. This led to us throwing a Thanksgiving party at Ashland Christian Church with our new Afghan and Hispanic friends. It was a great experience where we were able to break bread together and share of their food as well.

The day before the Thanksgiving feast one of the students told us that she didn't have any clothes to wear. Within 24 hours of asking area neighborhoods and friends for donations, we had a roomful of clothes to give away. When the families came for the feast, we invited one family at a time to pick whatever clothes they wanted. This led to the birth of our Disciples Depot. Now, once a month we open the church doors to the refugee and international community to come and get clothes, toys, and a new item each month. This has truly been the best way to engage the local community to help the refugees in need. Each month we feature a new item (soap, shampoo, diapers, etc.) and ask area neighborhoods and churches to donate these items as well as gently used clothes, toys, and household items. The response has been phenomenal! In order to make sure the refugee community was aware of our event we advertised to social services and resettlement organizations as well as asking our ESL students to spread the word. A key detail was that we made sure to advertise our flier in English, Spanish, and Dari, the language they speak in Afghanistan. This was done using google translate but it makes all the difference in the world when people see a flier in their own language. It helps them know that they are truly welcome!

We followed up with a Christmas party where we showered our new friends with gifts provided by an online angel tree that we created for both churches and the community to participate in. It was a beautiful celebration where one of the Afghan dads came up to us and said, "We have been in this country for several months and have had many struggles but thank you for finally putting back the smile on my child's face." During Christmas time we also decided this was a great time to take our ESL students out into the community for a practical English class, so we headed to our first field trip to Target. Through some donations at the church and donations from Target, the students, especially the moms, were able to finally be able to buy some items for their kids from an American store.

By March, the ESL families were asking when the next big get together would be. We decided to have a big party for the Persian New Year. It was a wonderful celebration where these families were able to forget about their worries for a few hours and dance and break bread with their American friends. They were so excited to share their food with us, but knowing that they are all on food stamps we didn't want them to be out of supplies so we gifted them with large bags of rice and platters of fruit. It was such a joyous experience to be able to share their food and culture.

To be able to support a newcomer and share not only in their joys but in their struggles as well is the best way to "love thy neighbor as thyself." They feel so supported when we go with them out and about in the community. Knowing they can rely on their church friends to come with them to the store allows them the freedom to venture out of their comfort zone and start becoming a part of the American society. The field trip aspect of our English class has continued with trips to the local library, strawberry picking, and most recently the science museum. Not only do these trips give our English class students a chance to practice what they learn, but it allows an opportunity for their kids to meet and spend time with the church volunteers and get to see a lot of different places they may otherwise not see.

The love and gratitude given by these families back to our volunteers was something we never anticipated when we first embarked on this journey. Our community is now much stronger because of these bridges we have built. Just recently we were able to sponsor a documentary Anahita at our local theatre. This is the story of an Afghan mom and how she escaped and came to America with her children. Films such as this help inspire others to join the ministry as well. Several other churches have now come to offer their assistance and it is in working together that we can truly serve as a beacon of light for all.

As we have gotten to know each family, they each have needs that we are able to help address. Some have such limited knowledge of English that they aren't able to read letters they receive to renew their food stamps, for example. With help from church volunteers, we are able to get that straightened out. We have taken several members of our English class families to job interviews and have been able to help some enroll in college. All of these are necessary steps to help assist these families so they can eventually attain the goal of self-sufficiency.



Though the road is long and arduous, some of the support we have received from the Regional Disciples of Christ church has allowed us to help in many ways including to help a family pay rent when their only breadwinner had to undergo surgery or help a single refugee mom with her bills. We have also been able to help 2 families obtain cars, which is critical in getting them to work.

Through generous donations and grant funding, we are able to help more and more families rebuild their lives in their new country - the land of freedom and opportunity - and the best part is we are able to truly serve as the hands and feet of God and how love to our neighbors.

“For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Matthew 25:35



## God's Table: A Wholeness Ministry at Bon Air Christian Church

“Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.” - 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

In 2019, Bon Air Christian Church discerned a mission focus on ministries of wholeness with a particular emphasis on mental wellness. Our congregation believes we have a unique opportunity to reach out, seek, and support those in distress of mind, body, and spirit. We seek to see ourselves and our neighbors as God sees us: whole people, body, mind, and spirit, loved and cared for by the God who made us in God's image. As the most disruptive period of the covid pandemic faded, we have recommitted ourselves to this ministry, hosting a number of programs in collaboration with NAMI of Central Virginia as well as studies of the books Emotionally Healthy Spirituality and Christ on the Psych Ward.

We have been exploring intentional avenues for promoting these ministries in our community, sharing information about mental wellness programs at the annual Bon Air Victorian Days and a newly launched Community Fun Day. In the future we are planning to host Mental Health First Aid trainings for our community, and to explore how BACC might be a host site for mental health provider to increase the accessibility of these services. A Dream Ministry see Grant from the Virginia Region will help us to turn this long-term vision into a reality. We give God thanks for the ministry of our Region and for the good work the Holy Spirit is u to in our midst!

David Finnegan-Hosey

Minister, Bon Air Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)





## West Side Christian Church Food Pantry Grant Recipient

Our food pantry kicked off in August. We had a month long food drive before that and finalized the partnership with the South Eastern Foodbank. West Side Christian Church is part of community in need. We have provided meals and emergency funds since we began as a congregation back in 1956. While most of our service has been to the homeless of Portsmouth, we have had food drives for the foodbank, provided families with holiday meals, and supported other non-profit organizations in the area. This food pantry was a long time hope of our sister, Becky Poindexter. The vision she had was one of offering those in need a place to come and be treated with compassion and dignity. We offer a shopping experience. With shelves set up like the grocery store, with the funds from the grant, we look forward to grocery carts, a refrigerator for fresh eggs, butter, cheese, milk and other cold items. We also have a box freezer for meat.

On our Grand Opening night we had amazing volunteers excited and ready to work and the evening went very well. We had 7 clients that represented 26 individuals. And we have increased client attendance with each pantry date. On Saturday, August 26, 2023 we had 11 clients that represented 35 individuals. In the month of September, we had 26 new households and 29 returning, with a total of 55 households and 172 people. And each month continues to grow.

We begin each opening with the prayer that we carry out the ministry Jesus would have us do and bless those who walk through our doors. The grant money received will help us live ore fully into that vision and provide needed food to our community. We are truly grateful and thankful for the approval of our application.

Blessings,

West Side Christian Church







## First Christian Church - Hampton

Debbie Ott

On November 18, 2022, I arrived at church to find 2 U-Haul trucks and a HELP van in our back parking lot. It was move-in day for HELP, an organization that works with the unsheltered in our area. Within a few hours that day, our classrooms were set up with sleeping mats and blankets. Food was stocked in our freezers and non-perishables filled our meeting space. Roughly 8 hours later we opened our doors to our unsheltered guests for the first time.

No one, aside from God himself, could have known what the next 100 days and nights would look like. At the time, we were walking into uncharted territory, fueled by the simple desire to be a blessing. Boy, did God open our eyes. Here we thought we were being a blessing, but in reality, we were the ones being blessed. Over the course of the next few days and weeks, several of our guests became friends. Familiar smiles when our church ladies prepared meals for the unsheltered on Wednesday mornings. Familiar smiles in our Worship Services. Familiar voices holding bible study in the fellowship hall and one familiar voice that sang like an angel echoing down our hallway.

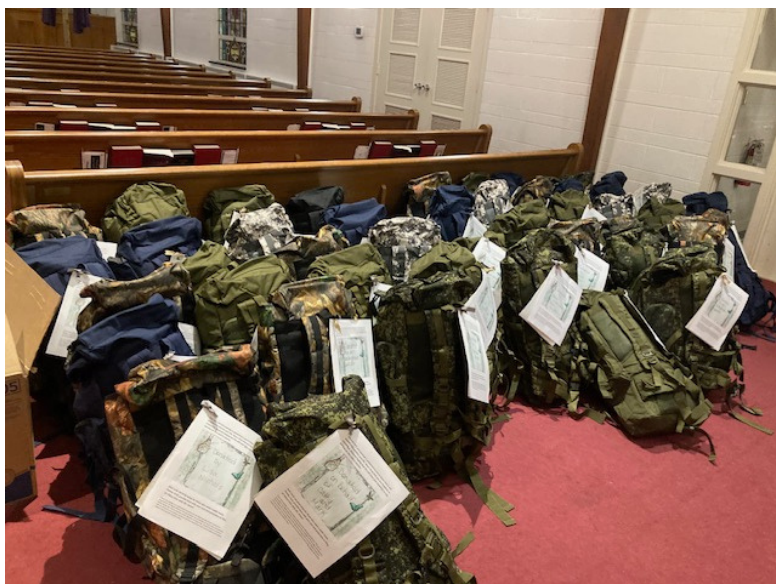
The guests we most connected with were African American men. Many volunteered with HELP and stayed at our church 24 hours a day, to cook and do laundry for the other guests. For them specifically, First Christian was home, and we were family.

One Sunday morning, I will never forget, I offered an invitation to discipleship. (As I knew one of our guests wanted to join our congregation). Imagine my surprise when he came forward along with 4 other unsheltered men. A few weeks later another guest joined, as well as his teenage son, whom I later had the privilege of baptizing. These men have been such a blessing to our congregation. They have volunteered to update our landscaping, cut the grass, redesigned flowerbeds, and taken out bushes so everyone can see our sign. They jump in when we have church meals, taking over the cooking and the cleanup. And recently when we held a neighborhood event, they showed up before they went to work, to do the heavy lifting so our older men didn't have to do it.

Thanks to their insight we now have a room in our building where anyone unsheltered who gets a housing voucher can come pick out furniture and household items, to make their new house a home. We have been able to restart our community feeding ministry "The Welcome Table". As one of our new members spearheaded the initiative to bring organizations throughout the community, to support our church in this ministry.

As a congregation we have learned a lot and have taken huge leaps. In just a few days, our congregation will vote to make one of our new “unsheltered” members a deacon. We offered coaching sessions to prepare our guests for success when the shelter closed. We partnered with an exchange club to obtain 100 backpacks filled with tents, sleeping bags, blankets, hats, socks, pots, pans, and other survival essentials. (Those were handed out to every guest on the day the shelter closed). We are already in discussion about one day turning one of our many bathrooms into a shower room, as well as brainstorming about new ministries to engage in, to support this population within our community.

It is exciting to share that First Christian held the most successful sheltering partnership last year that HELP has ever seen and we are already in conversation about becoming a shelter next fall. It is with gratitude that we receive the new ministry grant. We are eager to see where God will next lead us in our ministries with the unsheltered in our community.



## First Christian Church, Lynchburg - Dream Grant

Ken Burger

First Christian Church had been talking – dreaming – for more than a year of inviting an intern to help with Christian Education and Youth ministries. We reached out to the University of Lynchburg but there was no one in sight who met the need. Conversations with other educational institutions told the same story.

Then the Disciples Peace Fellowship brought a woman to Craig Springs -- a seminary student studying online at Phillips Theological Seminary who had a passion for children and youth ministries. Her profile fit well with the mission and ministry of First Christian and a Zoom interview was held. Honestly, it felt like a God moment. Then a second interview and that calling was affirmed.

But what about housing? First Christian converted a Sunday School class into an apartment with kitchen, bath and shower facilities in the same area thanks to improvements from decades earlier. The church's library makes for a great office especially since it's near the main office and Internet connections. But how does a shrinking congregation that needs some fresh life stretch its finances to pay for her monthly salary?

That's where the Dream Grant came in to play. An application was made to cover one month's salary ... and thankfully was approved!

Erin Gresham has been the Christian Education Intern at First Christian Church since about Thanksgiving of 2022. From the beginning and continuing, Erin has worked with church leaders and youth to coordinate planning as well as teach classes and lead \ a youth group that meets regularly. Erin has become an integral part of the First Christian's life and ministry, especially with Christian Ed and Youth, but beyond: she has attended board meetings, has led worship and returned to Craig Springs to help lead two camps. Beyond the walls of the church, she helped with the church's presence at Lynchburg's 4th Pride Festival; her smiling photo was on the top of the next day's Lynchburg News and Advance.

The original plan was for her to continue through the school year then return to her home in Illinois at the end of May. Ah, but this has been so successful that we are delighted that she will continue with us through 2023!





To apply for a Christian Church in Virginia grant, scan this QR Code to fill out an application:

