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make a difference, addressing problems in their own neighborhoods and around the world. The program started at Christ UMC in the Dallas suburb of Plano and now includes chapters in 17 states.

"There are so many different spy things and movies, and the kids just all love to pretend that they're spies. The concept with this is they get to be special agents doing God's work," explains Kathy Meadows, founder and executive director of Mission Possible Kids.

"God has missions that he wants these kids to go on to help other people," she says. "So we give them those missions to go on."

Meadows, a member of Christ United Methodist Church, started the program in 2003 as a hands-on experience for kids – and was surprised when 160 showed up for the first meeting.

"We knew, immediately, we had struck a nerve, for something that parents and kids alike were looking for," she says.

Meadows started a nonprofit organization to help other churches and organizations set up Mission Possible Kids programs.

Some missions are close to home, such as collecting donations for local food banks, volunteering at hospitals and making blankets for animal shelters.

Other projects span the globe, such as making "bandana buddy" toys for orphans in Guatemala and collecting eyeglasses for children in Cameroon.

Scientists at a remote base in Antarctica, accessible by air only once a year, are among the estimated 120,000 people touched so far by Mission Possible Kids' projects.

"We worked out a way, during that one time a year, to fly in a jar of warm wishes to them," says Meadows. "The kids packed this jar with tons of warm wishes. They could pull out one every day of the year and know the kids were thinking about them."

As more chapters are launched, Meadows expects her "secret agents" will reach a milestone of helping 500,000 people by the middle of 2009. The program is aimed at kids in kindergarten through the sixth grade, though older children also participate as mentors.

"It makes me feel like I'm being a good person," says Alex Paul, 9, a member of Custer Road United Methodist Church in Plano. "No matter what age we are, we can still contribute."

The young agents do "some amazing things," says the Rev. Don Underwood, pastor at Christ United Methodist.

"They're really learning a philosophy of life that will sustain them through the years," he says. "As far as I'm concerned, every (United) Methodist church in the country would be stronger if they had a Mission Possible Kids chapter."

Meadows hopes to continue expanding the program in the United States and organize chapters in other countries. Visit www.missionpossiblekids.org.

—John Gordon, United Methodist News Service

Oct. 29 Lesson for pastors: Financial stewardship is your responsibility

Nearly 20 Holston Conference pastors went to Texas this month to learn about financial stewardship and returned with new perspectives on their ministries. The seminar was led exclusively for Holston clergy by Michael Reeves at St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Plano.

"I think what came out of the seminar was that we must lead the church in every way, and good financial and stewardship leadership is crucial," said the Rev. Michelle Buckles, pastor at Cherokee UMC, Johnson City District.

The Rev. Wil Cantrell said he learned that tithing is not an administrative issue, but a spiritual one. Cantrell is associate pastor of Middlebrook Pike UMC of Knoxville District.

The Rev. Reeves – author of "Faith and Money and Extraordinary Money" and co-author of "Creative Giving" – was a speaker at Ministers Convocation 2008 in February. Reeves is senior associate pastor and director of strategic resources at St. Andrew.

He made such a positive impact, the conference stewardship office decided to select a group of clergy for an intensive seminar at St. Andrew UMC. District superintendents nominated pastors to attend. Eighteen went to Texas, led by the Rev. Bill Kilday, Holston director of stewardship.

Besides Reeves, who serves as senior associate pastor and director of strategic resources, other St. Andrew staff also made presentations.

Buckles realized that a barometer to one's spiritual health is what he or she is doing financially. She also learned that clergy should connect budget to people to get the congregation to support financial goals.

"The more you can get people excited about the church, the more they are willing to help make mission and ministry programs a reality," she said. "Our goal is not to fund a budget. The goal is to fund a mission and ministry."

Cantrell also came away understanding that stewardship is a part of the big picture of ministry.

"I learned that not only is the way we handle our money a spiritual issue, but a pastor's ability to understand money ... is a spiritual issue," he said. Even when pastors understand that giving is important, they sometimes view it as an administrative task that someone else can handle, he said.

Cantrell shared these other tips from the Texas seminar: Pastors should have ongoing conversations with and seek advice from the church's top givers. They should also address money and giving in positive ways and avoid publishing figures showing the budget is in a shortfall.

In some ways, the seminar reinforced his prior beliefs about giving, Cantrell said.

"I honestly believe God has given every church

what it needs to accomplish our mission, if we are fully willing to align our resources with our mission," he said.

Reeves also offered good advice for smaller churches, said the Rev. Bobby Black, pastor at Washington Hills UMC in Chattanooga District.

"You realize that you can scale it down to your situation," Black said. "It gave possibilities to what we want to do."

His church is interested in community outreach, he said, so he was glad to hear that people are more likely to support ministries that are viable and applicable to a community.

"Ministry to the poor is a means of grace," he said. "God blesses us because we can address the role of the church in a way that pleases Jesus."

—John Shearer for The Call 2

Oct. 15 Oneida church responds to the roadside needy

Lisa Lloyd usually sees them at exit 141 off I-75, as she is heading toward home in Oneida: People in need, possibly homeless. Often, they're holding a sign that begs, in some way, "Please help me."

Like many Christians, Lloyd often found herself confused about how to respond. She admits she is concerned for her safety, and she's not sure that giving money is the best solution.

"So I would just keep on driving by, praying that God would bless that person, but feeling terrible because I didn't help them," Lloyd said.

This summer, Lloyd pitched an idea to the elementary group at First Oneida UMC in Oak Ridge District. The children were asked to assemble "Love 'n Care Bags," which they store in their parents' cars until they encounter a person in need.

Love 'n Care bags are low-cost waist pouches or small backpacks. They include miniature-size personal hygiene products such as shampoo, lotion, soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste. Lloyd and the children also include small packs of bandages, laundry detergent, paper and pen, a pocket New Testament, a church brochure, and a personal note card expressing God's love.

So far, Lloyd and her group of seven children have distributed three bags, but they're carrying them in their cars for future opportunities. They're waiting to assemble additional bags whenever the first batch is depleted, and they celebrate with each other whenever a new bag has been placed.

"When we put together our first care bags, we were learning about caring for others in need," Lloyd says. The children learned the following scripture:

If we have all we need and see one of our own people in need, we must have pity on that person or else we cannot say we love God. Children, you show your love for others by truly helping them, and not merely talking about it. — 1 John 3:17-18 ■