

It is with a grateful heart that I write to share and celebrate with you what God is doing through the "Give Five Read Five" program and ministry opportunity here in the Southern Region of Wake County.

As you may recall, the word used to describe this endeavor of collecting 20,000 books so that every child at eight elementary schools would receive 5 books before the summer months was.... ambitious. I am excited to report that right now we have 18,525. We have a few places still collecting in and around the community and we were recently blessed with a donation of another 7,516 books which we are working to receive. We know at this point that we will have no less than 26,441 books.

Interestingly, the number of students in these eight elementary schools has increased. This increase means that 20,000 books are no longer enough, we now need 24,000. We were informed of this new number just one day after news of the most recent large donation of books came in. God provides!

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. (Malachi 3:10-12)

This isn't the first time we have clearly felt and seen God's presence in this kingdom work; and that's what this has been, kingdom work.

Although I have shared this with a few, I have not told many people this part of the story. Two weeks into the book drive we realized that we would not be receiving the significant media coverage we had anticipated. We all struggled with how to effectively reach out to the community at large; our plan depended on communicating to the masses beyond the local church setting. There were several things we could do and would do, but we knew this would not be enough.

I was not at peace.

My soul became restless and I found myself not able to be still. So much so, that late in the evening after the sun had set I went outside into the front yard and began to pace back and forth across my yard and driveway. I tend to walk around when I'm talking on the phone and now in prayer I was walking and talking with our Lord. Eventually, I reached out to some dear friends in a text message inviting them to pray with me.

I simply wrote, "please add me to your prayer list these next few days."

I woke up that next morning thinking of the owner of a small used bookstore in Siler City that my wife, kids, and I used to visit. I called her later that afternoon to see if she might be willing to donate books to this endeavor. I expected that she would not be able to do this and I was correct. Then she said, "but this morning a customer called in and said that when he was praying last night God told him to give away his store trade-in credit to someone who was looking for children's books." \$500 at a used book store.

Our plans...what a joke. It's easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of activity, but the truth is it was never our plan.

A couple of weeks later, we realized that we might only reach half of our goal on the current trajectory of things.

Again I was restless, but this time not with thoughts of not reaching our goal. This time the restlessness came in anticipation of what God was about to do. I knew God was about to make another move to propel us forward again. I knew that God was speaking to someone. The reality was that we might only reach 10,000 books. However, in the kingdom, the reality was that God called us to this place, God had already been at work, is at work, and will be at work. So the prayers included whoever else it was that God was speaking to that evening.

Again, in my yard as I paced back and forth praying I sent out this prayer request.

"I'm restless this evening. Around the work in which I've been leading a team of youth leaders and adult advisers. Everything is on track, last time I felt this God did something unexpected and awesome. Please keep me in prayer and others God may be whispering to tonight."

Perhaps the best immediate response to that text was, "Blessings for good ears!"

I was at peace.

The next day, I came across a notice in an online advertisement that a new used bookstore was opening in Raleigh. I was compelled to reach out to them and the response was amazing!

Just a few days before we had some funds come in to purchase books. That morning the owner of this bookstore which had not yet had its grand opening offered to provide books at 15.3 cents per book and opened the doors to our team prior to the grand opening.

I sent this message back to those who had been praying around this.

"Just as before, something God-sized has occurred. I'll share more in the days to come. It's a great story of discipleship and discipling. It's a great story of the ongoing transformation of individuals and the broader community. It's a great story of being in

ministry with each other, with the community, and particularly with countless numbers of children. Thanks be to God!"

We can and are celebrating all of this. None of this is because of what we've done, we are simply glad to be a part of what God is doing.

That said this has always been about more than collecting books. These books will be given as a means of support and resource to children. This is a way of addressing a social justice issue as we point to and address a significant contributing factor to learning loss among today's students. This is important. However, this has also been about discipling this team of leaders.

Early on I asked the youth members of our team to move beyond the who, what, where, when, and how questions to the why. Why is this important? What compels us to answer this call?

Although this team is led by youth, these youth have been paired up with adult advisers throughout this process. I am humbled to serve as the senior adviser. The youth that have been working closely with me are not only taking what we are learning together for themselves, but they are also sharing what they are learning with others.

(I could go on about this particular piece. There is so much to share about how this has transformed them in their everyday living at school, work, etc. to reflect their following of Jesus.)

Together, they have taken to heart the story of Jesus removing obstacles that lay between the most vulnerable in this world and the fountain of grace.

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ... And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-14, 16)

By providing this resource of books, particularly for our friends who are economically disadvantaged, we are helping to clear the path for them. It is our shared hope that these children will have the opportunity to grow into the fullness of who God has created them to be.

We don't know if these children have been baptized; however, we know that regardless they too are children of God. In response to God's grace, this is one way we are living into our baptismal covenant with God and with each other. When we said we would proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ, that we would surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others, that we would pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life... we meant it.

Bishop Ward's words in the March NC Advocate resonated with our team, "We are called to be engaged with children. To help them grow as Jesus did, in wisdom and stature, and in favor with all humanity, as well as with God."

With great joy I am happy to share that this opportunity to be in ministry with and alongside each other as a team as well with the countless numbers of others in the community of all ages over the past 6-7 months has been and continues to be a transformational experience for everyone who has been touched by this ministry.

Today, these youth and the adults working with them are not only saying what they believe, but they are living it. They are members of Holland's UMC and most importantly are followers of Jesus.

We have two big days ahead of us. A last purchase/sorting of used books day and the distribution day. If you would like to help on either of these days or simply come by to see, you are invited and welcomed. For more information you can contact me at mwellborn@nccumc.org.

On Sunday, May 4 we will have two large groups of volunteers working at two different sites. One group will be at a used bookstore and another at the warehouse here in Garner.

On Saturday, May 17 these eight elementary schools will be sending teachers or representatives to "shop" for books for their students. This allows those who know the students to select books that meet their reading level, are challenging, and are of interest to each child.

Isn't it exciting to be a part of what God is doing?! Glory be to God!

Blessings friend,

Brian

Pastor of Outreach and Mission

Holland's United Methodist Church