

What Can You Do When Your Congregation Is Small? Start Small and Think Big!

By Christie Warnick

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood Outreach Chair

The congregation of the [First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood](#) is small and comprised mostly of folks between the ages of 50 and 101. On a good Sunday, we may have 25 in attendance at worship. Most of the time, attendance is in the teens. Our part-time pastor is an ordained Methodist minister, so Session really runs the church. Thank goodness we have a great moderator, Rev. Robin Ray from Bridgeport.

In 2012, we began to look for ways to have more impact on our community. There was only so much a very small group of older folks mostly on fixed incomes could donate or do, but we had a very musical congregation. Our pastor, Rev. James Riggs, suggested we host a musical evening and named it the "Cornucopia of Thanks Concert." He and our choir director, Janet Szylagyi, invited other choirs and musicians to join us. Women's Association hosted a dessert reception after the concert. The event was a success, raising about \$1,000 for [Food for Preston](#). We have hosted a "Cornucopia of Thanks Concert" every November since then and have raised a cumulative \$11,000 to support the combined food pantries in Preston County, including weekend backpacks of food for hungry students.



This year, it was so well attended that we had to put some folding chairs in the aisles to accommodate the crowd. Even the balcony was filled to capacity. Lots of non-perishable foods were donated in addition to the freewill offering of \$3,004. The director of Food for Preston was given the donations that evening.

In spring of 2013, we started filling tote bags with school and hygiene supplies for 12 homeless students in our local middle school. Our members donated all the items. Word of our program reached the Albright United Methodist Church, and they decided to partner with us. That December, we added homeless boys in our county high school and delivered 23 bags. (Homeless girls at the high school were covered by a local service sorority.) Between the two churches and two individuals who donated items, we continued through the next year.

Then, during our Christmas 2014 distribution, something spectacular happened! We had run out of the donated tote bags, so we packed Christmas paper bags. As we delivered them to the schools, the handles broke off several bags. What to do? Heartland of Preston County had been bought by Pine Ridge Corporation, so we went there to see if any tote bags with the Heartland logo were left. The new director had no items left from Heartland, but he arranged for a donation from the new corporation. It turned out to be \$1,200. We bought better bags!



Now with a fund, we began to think bigger, adding all homeless girls at the high school. In the fall of 2015, we contacted other churches in the area, spoke to several organizations, and put signs up in some local businesses. For the last two years, we have received donations of money and items from seven churches, three organizations, and nine individuals. We now cover every homeless student in Preston County. On March 8, we delivered 56 bags to the schools through Preston County Schools' homeless coordinator.



The bags are reusable and snap closed for privacy. Each student gets soap, shampoo, deodorant, wash rag, towel, nail file, comb, toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss and body lotion, plus acne treatments, shaving cream, and sanitary supplies as appropriate. In addition, there are pencils, pens, glue sticks, notebook paper, spiral notebooks and erasers.

In the fall, we provide each school with backpacks loaded with supplies for any students who show up without what they need after school starts. The backpacks include calculators, rulers, compasses and protractors in addition to all supplies listed above. Then, we resupply the students in November and February or March. In May, we pay off outstanding school bills for graduating homeless students so they can receive their diplomas, and we give all homeless students hygiene supplies for the summer, including sunscreen.

Included in each bag is a note that says, "God loves you, and we care. These items were provided for you by a group of churches, organizations and individuals." We include an invitation for the families to attend a free laundry event at the local laundromat, where we bring quarters, detergents and dryer sheets and help folks wash, dry and fold their laundry.

So, our small effort has grown into something big, and it just got bigger. The 2018 National President of [Ruritan](#), Clinton Guy Cox, is from Kingwood. His wife, Linda, as First Lady of Ruritan National, needed a service project to promote for the duration of her husband's term, so she adopted and adapted our Homeless Student Project and has taken it to Ruritan Clubs in 25 states.

Remember the loaves and fishes?

When we realized that our 140-year-old building needed a new roof, gutters and other major repairs that were more than we ourselves could afford, we applied for a grant from the WV State Historic Preservation Office. As part of the application, we needed three letters of support from the community. We received letters from Preston County Schools, the Preston County Commission, Food For Preston, Main Street Kingwood, Ruritan National, the City Council of Kingwood, the Kingwood Volunteer Fire Department, and a member of the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates). And we got the grant.

So, what can a small church do? You'd be amazed!