

**Lester Memorial UMC and
The Appalachia Service Project
By Joe Hastings**

“We accept people where they are, just as they are.” Glenn ‘Tex’ Evans, founder of ASP



In the late summer of 1986 a group of Lester Memorial youth gathered in the old Branscomb building that housed the youth director at the time, and brainstormed about prospective mission opportunities in the coming year. After bouncing around several possibilities, it became apparent that serving with the Appalachia Service Project provided the right combination of opportunity for service and

an organizational structure that would allow the youth to serve God and share their faith in a new way. As a result, Lester Memorial sent its first group of youth and adults to Bartley, West Virginia in July of 1987. Since that time, Lester Memorial has supported the work of ASP each year, sharing God’s love through home repair.

Appalachia Service Project began in Kentucky in 1969. Glenn “Tex” Evans, a United Methodist pastor, wanted to engage his youth group in an outreach that would allow them to serve God through home repair. His stated goal was to make homes ‘warmer, safer and drier’ and to minister to the spiritual and relational needs of the people of Central Appalachia. From that small beginning, ASP has grown to a year-round ministry, with a summer outreach program hosting volunteers from all over the United States in 14-16 centers. Over 14000 homes have been repaired by over 260,000 volunteers.

Lester Memorial has sent at least one team to work with ASP every year since 1987. We have traveled to Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, West Virginia

and Virginia. The church has supported this work through financial contributions and in materials donated. Our youth have made a real difference in the life of the people of Appalachia.

A typical week on ASP begins on arrival at the center on Sunday afternoon. After settling into the plush accommodations, usually a school or community center, the group gets to know the other groups and the staff that oversees the work in that community. One adult leader and one youth go to the homes that afternoon to meet the family and assess the project they will work on for the week. After supper, 'formal' introductions are made, Lester Memorial's group being renowned for its "Covered Bridge" introduction skit.

Work on the homes begins on Monday morning after devotions and breakfast. An emphasis is placed on meeting and getting to know the families whose homes are being repaired. ASP is described as a 'relational ministry that does home repair on the side'. Many of our youth and adults have been blessed beyond description by the friends they have made while working on a roof, porch or bathroom floor. Lunches (bologna and peanut butter sandwiches!) are made prior to leaving the center, and are eaten on the worksite, often with family sharing the meal with us. Work continues until around 4:30 each day. Back at the center, tool clean-up, showers (sometimes they're even hot!) and some much needed rest are before supper.

After the evening meal, the staff leads an 'Evening Gathering', which includes lots of singing, and a program related to the need of the area, concerning economics and the importance of our Christian witness in impoverished areas. After 'EG', there is usually time for a run to the local ice cream parlor, as well as free time for basketball, Frisbee or some serious porch-sitting. Bedtime comes none too soon!

On Tuesday night the staff has 'Culture Night'. A person or group from the community comes to share with the groups something of the flavor of the Appalachian area and culture. We have been treated to some terrific storytellers, guitar and fiddle players and tours of coal mining communities and heritage.

Thursday evenings are reserved for the picnic. The entire group, along with the families we are working for, go to a local park for a hamburger and hotdog cookout with all the trimmings. This is an excellent time to share God's goodness in the beauty of the mountains.

Work concludes on Friday, and tools are packed up, and goodbyes are said to the families. While it is sad to leave, both the families and our groups are blessed by the week of work. At the Friday evening gathering, each person has the opportunity to say what the week has meant to them. This is always a very moving worship experience.

The group heads for home on Saturday, after doing the necessary chores around the center. A tradition has been that the group shares breakfast at the first CrackerBarrel restaurant we come to.

A variety of means have been used to help pay for the trips to ASP. Our youth have sold Christmas trees, spaghetti dinners, and have been supported by the adult Sunday school classes, many of which have donated the cost of a work team donation. In 2002, a new tradition for fund-raising began with the first annual HeeHaw production. Led by many of our adults and youth, a country styled dinner is served, and a night of jokes, singing and hilarity follows. We have been blessed by many guitar, bass, and fiddle players helping with the show, both youth and adults. Due to the response of the church and community, it has come to require two nights to accommodate the crowds. HeeHaw has become a springtime tradition at Lester Memorial.

It is safe to say that everyone that has participated in ASP at Lester Memorial has received a blessing. We can also claim to have shared that blessing with others by sending some of our youth to work as summer staff. This has been a real outreach for us as well.

Lester Memorial has been blessed by its participation in ASP. In turn, the youth and adults who have had the opportunity to participate in home repair have been a blessing to those whom they have served. God has blessed us in a powerful way through the ministry of Appalachia Service Project.

This has been an ongoing mission project for well over 20 years here at Lester Memorial UMC. Dr Joe Hastings has been very involved in providing leadership to make this an annual event. Teams of about 35 persons including youth and adults from the Church have gone to Appalachian Mountain areas in Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, North Carolina and other areas to assist the needy with home repairs, etc.

Sunday July 29, 2007, we held a special 20 year celebration to recognize all of those who have gone the extra mile to minister in the name of Christ. HEE HAW is the annual fundraiser for ASP. The ASP trip to Trade TN included 35 of our very best youth and adults and took place June 14-21, 2008.

HEE HAW 2009 was in the LMUMC Fellowship Hall on April 25 & 26 ... and then we headed to Wolfe County, KY June 13-20. ASP for 2010 is set for JUNE 12-19! Make your plans now to go!

KATRINA WORK/MISSION TEAMS

Lester Memorial UMC has sent at least 6 Teams to LA/MS to help with home repairs after storms. The most recent Teams went on Feb 1-4, 2007(14 persons); on April 13-15, 2007(20 persons); on August 2-5, 2007 to Gretna LA; and October 24-27, 2008 to New Orleans. If you are interested on helping with future events, call the Church office at 205-625-5681.

Last group left on Feb 26 and returned March 1, 2009. Thanks to the 20 volunteers who represented the Body of Christ through Lester Memorial UMC