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Church opens doors during afterschool hours

By Janet Conner-Knox | Times Staff Writer

Church members at St. Marks and La Guadalupana open the doors to their church located on Nash Street now a lot more often than they use to.

The reason Father Philip Byrum and members of the two congregations are gathered every afternoon - Monday through Thursday from 3 p.m. until 6 p.m. - is to help neighborhood children with their school studies and to assist them with their homework.

It is a new effort started in September by the church to reach into the community and have their doors open for more than church services.

"We are not here just for the children that have parents that come to church here," said Byrum. "Parents can send any child that would like to come right here. I don't call what we are doing a program, because it is not structured like a program."

There are no contracts to sign and there are no special days the children must attend. In fact, neighborhood children come for free and for as many days during the week as their family wishes.

Right now about 15 neighborhood elementary-school aged children come after school for the help and to socialize with the other children who come.

Byrum said that the members of the church see the after-school service as a way to help people in the surrounding community.

Church members give the children a snack and then direct them to their studies. Byrum said he and church members have contact with the schools and know what the children are expected to do for class.

Mavis Edmundson, church member, said that the new church assignment is going well. She said that she is basically there to make sure the children are doing their homework before they get on the computer to have fun.

"The children don't really need a lot of help with their homework," said Edmundson. "We have a retired math teacher that comes most days and helps with math. When she is not here, we call her and get help over the phone if we need help."

Edmundson said that she is impressed with how smart all of the children are. She said in October, two brothers began coming to the church every day for help with school work.

"They were about 6 and 7 years old and spoke no English at all," said Edmundson. "Here it is seven months later, and they are fluent in English and hardly require any help at all with homework."

Once homework is checked, other activities begin.

Because the space where the children do their homework is used for church services also for both the St. Marks and the La Guadalupana congregations, the children don't run around, but play quiet games on the computer or read a book.

The children can take the books home if they wish.

"We have had the blessing of many donated books for the children," said Byrum. "I never force the children to take the books home, but they know the books are here for them to take."

Byrum said he does have a couple of things he would like for their after-school activities. He said they could use some basic software for the four computers the children use.

The other wish is to have more children participate.

"Right now if you come in, the majority of the children are little Latino boys," said Byrum. "We are just thrilled to have the boys, but just one or two girls attend. The hope is that all of the children will start to come here. We have open our doors and hearts to all of the children - black, white, brown, no matter who they are."

The activities are expected to slow down after school closes during the summer and the church will only be open on Tuesdays and Thursdays until noon.

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