

Photos provided by AppleTree



Living and teaching the fruits of the Spirit

One of the case studies in the research conducted by Garland, et al., for “Congregations Who Care for Children” was at the Full Gospel Tabernacle Church in Truth or Consequences, NM. Grant co-author M. LeAnn Gardner, profiles that ministry in the article below.

Truth or Consequences is a small town situated on the Rio Grande River in Sierra County, NM. Named after a popular TV game show from the 1970s, the town has 15,000 residents, 80% of which are considered to be living in poverty or “at risk” of living in poverty. Only 34% of the adults have a high school diploma or higher and \$24,000 is the average household income. Truth or Consequences’ (TorC) Full Gospel Tabernacle opened its doors to the community in 1979 providing a place of worship and community outreach.

In the mid-1990s, the church experienced the tragic death of a minister and a split in its membership. It was a crossroads and forced the church members to think about their purpose and mission. As part of that experience, they began to explore how to make effective use of church space.

In 1996, a young, enthusiastic Rebecca Dow arrived in TorC from Tulsa, OK, where she was working with a ministry that focused on quality improvement for church-based children’s ministry. She came to TorC to facilitate a training event for the church nursery staff at Full Gospel.

For Dow, this trip was a return to familiar soil; she had lived there as a child and had, she said, “fallen in love with the community.” Her passion for children’s ministry was planted in her as a child as she grew up with



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parents who were very involved in children's ministry.

When she saw the need of the community during that training weekend in 1996, she felt called to return to her childhood home to start a child care center. The church already had been approached by Head Start, but church members wanted to offer their services and ministry to all children, without restriction. That was Dow's vision, too, so, with the church's support, she formed a separate 501(c)(3) called AppleTree Child Development Center.

Full Gospel Church was eager to use its available space in this way and hoped that the child care center would be an outflow of its mission outreach to the community. The church gave Appletree a loan for \$36,000 to begin operations. This money, along with much prayer, energy and passion, was the launching pad for the beginning of an incredible ministry.

"Appletree is providing the community with something they desperately need," said Mike Skidmore, who pastors the church with his wife, Elaine. "The church has a real sense of pride that we're doing hands-on ministry.

"The church gives many in-kind offerings to help the ministry succeed. Of course, there are issues with scheduling and wear-and-tear on the buildings, but all of that is worth the ministry Appletree provides to the community," Mike Skidmore said.

Twenty percent of the center's families attend Full Gospel Church.

One of the hallmarks of AppleTree is its relationship to government funding. Soon after starting her job as director of the center, Dow, who had completed her Associate's in Arts degree in early childhood education, began applying for governmental funding. Dow applied for 80 grants before she was awarded one, but



Play therapy sessions are offered at AppleTree Child Development Center, which has been named the No. 1 child care center in New Mexico.

now she is successful with 90% of her grant proposals.

She has received Department of Housing and Urban Development Grants, Title V, Department of Health, and Department of Labor grants. This funding provides an on-site nurse and a licensed counselor/community outreach staff member who visits students' homes, teaches parenting seminars, and is available to the staff for counseling.

Because of the various grants the program receives, the budget of AppleTree is more than \$1.5 million. Many in the community did not realize that a faith-based organization could accept government funds, so Dow has had the opportunity to explain the federal guidelines regarding religion and how Appletree complies with them.

Some members of the church, though, were skeptical of the funding at first, until they visited the center and saw its work firsthand. "One of our most vocal critics was a member of the church until he saw what we do; now he is one of our biggest advocates," Dow said.

To continue educating the church and the community, Dow and Mike Skidmore attend community meetings and try to form relationships in the TorC community. Part of that education is helping people understand the guidelines of these partnerships with the government.

"In the guidelines, the program must reflect the community. We do this by incorporating faith because 78% of the community is Catholic. But we also have Jewish families and we respect their heritage as well. Cultural events, such as Cinco de Mayo, are also recognized and observed," she said.

The center serves 100 families in Sierra County for infants through 24 months with a staff of 37 and 90 youth and adult volunteers. Nevertheless, AppleTree is serving less than 30% of the population in need, Dow said.

"I do not think proselytizing young children is developmentally appropriate," said Dow, who worked four years without taking a salary. "We communicate our faith by living out and teaching the children the fruits of the spirit and the quality of care that we give to our students."

As one example, the lead teachers are Christian and one of their significant ministries is to provide free meals for low-income children – 36,000 meals last year.

"We are in a community that is hurting," she said, "and our center provides a safe and lov-



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AppleTree Child Development Center

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ing environment for many children who live there."

Dow's dream is for AppleTree to be a training ground for young teachers. There is already a loan repayment program in place and more than half of AppleTree's 36

teachers are enrolled in college. Presently, Dow is expanding her dream by talking with AmeriCorps and the Vista program about making AppleTree a volunteer site.

The opportunities the center is giving to teachers is deeply appreciated, Mike Skidmore said. "The other day, I was taking with a teacher of the 4-year-olds. She is enrolled in college because of AppleTree's continuing education program. Her eyes were filled with tears telling me how thankful she was for this place. Lives are changed here, and it's not only the students, it's the teachers," he said.

The church's and Dow's commitment to the center have resulted in AppleTree being ranked in the top 1% of quality care in New Mexico and the No. 1 child care center in the state. AppleTree also received the Exemplary Program Award in 2006 from the Association of Christian Schools International.

"I really think that for the church to survive in the 21st century, we need to be educating about Christianity as it applies to a postmodern culture," she said. "Part of that is learning how community and faith-based groups can partner together to serve children and to live out the Gospel message."

Dow also hopes to develop an intern program that models for students how community and faith-based entities can work alongside one another, serving children and in the center's case, living out the Great Commission.

"Your Christian vision does not have to be compromised in this model," she said. "At AppleTree, you will see community members volunteering their time and giving resources. The quote I'm reminded of when I think of this community is 'Share the Gospel at all times, sometimes use words.'"



An innovative loan replacement program at AppleTree enables half of its teachers to enroll in college.