

## **Bridgewater Church Outreach to Parents and Young Children Launched Published in The Shenandoah Update December 7, 2022**

Since 1968, the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren has had a vision for the education of children, and early education in particular. Early education proponent Laverle Sappington and others started the church on this journey with children and families decades ago. Yet, this vision has had several expressions over time, including preschool, daycare, and before and after school programming. When COVID-19 hit the area in 2020, the before and after school program was able to remain open. However, the existing preschool program shut down. Yet, the vision flourished among several church members, and the congregation has recently launched the Connections Early Learning Center.

Leanne Kreps, director of the new center, said that lockdowns during the coronavirus outbreak “actually helped” spur discussion and planning for the next steps in launching the early learning center.” As more members came to understand how to use the online meeting platform Zoom, meetings could occur without fear of spreading the virus, and the momentum for the learning center grew. The number of planning meetings increased because people had more time to meet,” she noted.

There have been fits and starts with the idea of developing a childcare program for children and parents in the community for many years. Kreps remembers that in 2008 and 2009, the financial crisis halted their planning for an early learning center. Instead, they stayed focused on community mobilization around investing in belief in the program. Then, in 2016, things picked up again, and by 2019, members were jumping on the bandwagon.

During the coronavirus years, church members held three to five meetings weekly. Nine committees were convened, and out of these discussions, they created a video describing the possibilities for establishing an early learning center with project-based learning methods. The whole church was encouraged to watch the video, which highlighted pieces of the plan, diagrams of classrooms, and the financial statement. Afterward, they hosted Zoom “speak-outs” about the potential for establishing the center. Guiding values were identified, and enthusiasm for the vision continued to build. The committees formulated bylaws and recruited a nine-member board to govern the project. It was also decided that the church should make the ministry outreach stand on its own as a 501(c)(3) organization.

As the vision was becoming a reality, renovations to the facility needed to be completed. The congregation committed \$200,000 to transform indoor and outdoor spaces to host the project-based learning environment. Mounds of dirt were moved to create a place for nature-based outdoor education and an elementary school-aged space for hanging out. A large gazebo was also installed to provide a place for infants and toddlers to be outside. In addition, mulch and repurposed logs and tires were placed as a playground to encourage jumping and balance activities.

Before opening a few months ago, Kreps said there were 130 children on the waiting list. “There just aren’t enough spots for daycare available locally,” she said. So on August 15 this year, Connections Early Learning Center opened its doors to 48 full-day participants and 25 before and after school students.

Bridgewater Pastor for Worship and Administration David Miller says the center fulfilled the purpose for the church building when it was established over 20 years ago. “It was built in 1998 with a goal of regular use of the building for community service,” he said.

Miller noted that another important goal of the church was for any program to be “managed by people who have knowledge ...,” and for all employees to be paid “... a living wage.” Another priority for the congregation was to “Incorporate a curriculum that models living in ways that honor the church’s Brethren heritage,” he said.

According to Miller, there were many other objectives for the center. He explained that the church would like to see the center “... offer their services and make it possible for all socioeconomic incomes to participate.” Since the Connections Early Learning Center complies with the Virginia Department of Education’s licensing requirements, it accepts payments from government sources for families qualifying for aid. Additionally, Kreps said there are sliding fees for participants and scholarships to help children who may otherwise not be able to attend. Miller said the congregation charges the center \$1 monthly for rent and pays for the electric bill and custodial services. In addition, the center contributes to some of the Wi-Fi costs. Without this level of support, the fees for children attending would be too high.

Other partnerships for the center are beginning to emerge. The Town of Bridgewater has provided a three-year grant to offset costs, and some community partners are interested in supporting the project-based learning program. More business and community partners are being sought.

Miller is encouraged by the developing project. “It is an example of a church partnership with others who bring real expertise to getting something like this off the ground,” he said. Kreps, a member of the Bridgewater congregation, agreed, “Although not a religious program per se, it would not exist without the Bridgewater church.”

There are educational partners, as well. Bridgewater College and Blue Ridge Community College are being tapped for staffing and internship opportunities. Kreps said Connections is becoming a place for local colleges to send students to observe or intern.” She also sees the possibility of an intergenerational component in the future, especially regarding outdoor learning activities. “I’m thrilled to see where this program can go,” said Kreps.

For more information, visit <https://www.connectionsearlylearning.org/>

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