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Church members paying it forward \$50 at a time

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VERNON — It may not seem like \$50 is much, but the First Congregational Church has been running a program called “Pay it Forward” that is showing the community just how far 50 bucks can go toward helping out and inspiring hope.

Church member Paul Shimer brought the idea to Vernon after reading about Congregational churches in New Milford and Waterbury that had randomly selected parishioners to receive \$50 cash to help out a cause of their choice.

The concept has spread across the country after the Rev. Denny Bellesi handed out \$100 each to 100 members of his Cost Hills Community Church in Orange County, Calif., several years ago. The pastor and his wife told the Associated Press they were inspired by the movie, “Pay It Forward,” which focused on a boy’s endeavor to change the world by doing good deeds for three people, according to a 2009 article originally published in the Waterbury Republican-American.

Mary Wheeler, who serves on the Vernon church’s stewardship and evangelism committee with Shimer, said participants sign up on index cards, which are put into a drawing.

“You get \$50 in cash once your name is drawn, and then you have to report back the next week in front of the whole congregation what you did with that money, so it’s accountable,” Wheeler said.

She added that participation in the program is not limited to church members, but the person does have to be present at the 10 a.m. Sunday service when their name is called to get the money.

“I think the thing that’s interesting about it is that there were two reasons to do it, one is that it’s another way that we can expand our mission in the community. And it’s a very selfish way to get members of our congregation to come to church, because you’ve got to be there,” Shimer joked.

Donations made the first few weeks of the program possible, and it’s donations that have kept the program going far longer than anyone had expected, Shimer said.

Charles Markunas, who chairs the stewardship and evangelism committee, has been keeping a scrapbook filled with information about each of the 11 weekly pay-it-forward moments that have taken place since the program began Oct. 17.

One person gave their \$50 to a program that raises rescue dogs, and returned the following week with one of the dogs, an Australian shepherd named Summit.

Another young man gave the money to a neighboring family whose child was physically challenged, “to help defray the cost of a specially made boot,” Wheeler said.

When the family went to the company that makes the custom footwear, however, “that person was so impressed at how this took place, that he waived the fee for the special boots. So this winter, for the first time, this kid can run and play in the snow, and that was a teenager that did that,” Wheeler said. “The whole congregation applauded that kid big time.”

Markunas said other participants have donated the cash to local charities, including the

Visiting Nurses Association, the Hockanum Valley Community Council's food pantry, the Cornerstone soup kitchen and shelter, and the Hartford branch of Habitat for Humanity.

"The spirit of the program has been wonderful. People have been so responsive, and we're sort of amazed. It just keeps growing; it's going into the new year," the Rev. David Minnick, interim senior pastor, said.

Markunas said Pay it Forward has funding for a further eight weeks, and Minnick said a separate donation was made to the church confirmation class to start its own, mini version of the program.

People of all ages are getting involved in the program, including one little girl named Madeleine who was thrilled when her name was picked, according to Markunas and others.

She chose to give her \$50 to KidSafe, a local nonprofit that specializes in the treatment and prevention of child abuse, for the purchase of toiletries and other essentials needed by children in the community.

"It's kind of teaching lessons at every age. ... It's not just old people that want to be good!" Wheeler said.

"It's been really rich, people have been wonderfully creative, and are really having fun with it. ... It really has inspired a sense of generosity," Minnick said.

"Our goal is to create something to educate people about all the other things and the needs in the community," Markunas said. "It's really a gift-from-the-heart type program."

For more information about the Pay it Forward program, call the First Congregational Church of Vernon at 860-875-7580.

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