



Harvesting a Garden of Hope

By Becky Wehrspann

Rebecca's Garden of Hope Ministry is alive and well in Yerington, Nevada.



There is a sense of urgency as it relates to my passion for getting out there and telling people about Jesus,” affirms Sanya Parson, Executive Director of Rebecca’s Garden of Hope. “I believe every congregation should have a Rebecca’s Garden of Hope. We need to provide those platforms and opportunities to have intergenerational connections, fellowship, and unity in the body of Christ. We remember 1 Corinthians 15:58: *Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*”

Rebecca’s Garden of Hope (RGOH), based at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Orlando, Florida, was the recipient of a \$100,000 LWML Mission Grant in the 2013–2015 biennium. With those funds, their model of tutoring and mentoring to further Christ’s Kingdom has been shared with more than 200 partnering congregations. For 12 years, RGOH has been reaching out to youth in communities across the United States and beyond.

Sanya brought news to the Albuquerque LWML Convention of the successes of Rebecca’s Garden of Hope. She is passionate about encouraging others to reach out in their congregations and communities with the love of Jesus. I’ve had several opportunities recently to be in conversation with her, and I now invite you to learn more about God’s working through the volunteers of this growing organization.

What is Rebecca’s Garden of Hope?

“Rebecca’s Garden of Hope is an outreach ministry that uses after-school tutoring and mentoring to invite more children and families to know Christ. It is a platform that provides a unique way for churches to develop long-term relationships with the local neighborhoods and teaches young people how to be servant leaders in those churches and communities. The core of why we do what we do is so our children know Christ as their Savior. The tutoring program is about improving education outcomes, decreasing drop-out rates, providing essential life skills for young people and strategies to develop social, civic, and Christ-centered discipleship. Mark tells us in chapter 10 that Jesus said: *‘Let the children come to me ... for such belongs the kingdom of God.’* Our passion is huge!”

How did Rebecca’s Garden of Hope get its name?

“To come full circle and be able to work with a ministry named after my mother is humbling and a reminder that God’s hand is always working in every aspect of our lives. My mother was a teacher for many years with a passion for helping students excel. She blessed many with her kindness and compassion before dying of breast cancer when she was only 56. My father, the Rev. William T. Parson, recently went home to heaven. He was an LCMS pastor for more than 40 years and an advocate and trailblazer who worked to equip and train youth to become Christ-

centered leaders in the community. It is their love, strength, courage, and support that started my wheels turning in the area of serving.

“My parents will be remembered for teaching and showing me the importance of serving others in need. At a very young age I wondered why they were always so eager to help other people. At the time I did not understand it, but looking back, I truly appreciate the life lessons they both taught me. I feel blessed by the examples they set for me along the way, and we continue those through our ministry at Rebecca’s Garden of Hope.”

Why is youth ministry important to you?

“My passion for helping children started in my youth as I grew up watching my father and mother actively engaged in ministry with youth in the community, most coming out of pretty tough environments. They were focused on giving everyone access to the gift that money can’t buy — Jesus Christ. My dad was serious about teaching the importance of building on a foundation in Christ. He taught my sisters and me Greek and Hebrew as we studied God’s Word together. I saw them not just talk about making sacrifices and helping others but get right in the trenches with people who were in some pretty tough situations and tirelessly forging ahead, despite their means or circumstances.

“Because my father was the pastor, I remember being at church before anyone else arrived and the last ones to



close the doors almost every day of the week. When we were younger, we didn't necessarily like that arrangement, but in hindsight, I can see how those boundaries probably kept us out of a lot of trouble and gave us a view into the value of focusing on others and not ourselves. My mother and father taught my sisters and me the importance of never making life about us but always keeping the focus on God."

How did Rebecca's Garden of Hope get started?

"Rebecca's Garden of Hope was born out of a desire to bolster Sunday School attendance by reaching out to children in the neighborhood. Putting feet to faith, we canvassed the neighborhood, and the response was unbelievable. Over 100 children came just a few weeks into our efforts. Deciding there was a need to keep them engaged, a tutoring program was born. But this is not just about tutoring and mentoring. It's about reaching our neighbors with the love of Christ. Tutoring and mentoring is just the hook.

"There are very few platforms that give communities and congregations a chance to make long-term impacts. It is an opportunity for mentors to sit down and talk to the kids, find out who they are, and develop those relationships. We (at Our Savior) require that our children who are in

our tutoring program attend church. In our tutoring schedule, we also have youth Bible study. We teach them about Baptism and the Ten Commandments. We encourage them to talk to Mom and Dad and be part of this loving family. We encourage their desires to come and actively worship and be a part of Sunday School. It is designed to engage them in ways they had not been engaged. We keep it exciting and fun for them!"

How has this ministry grown since its beginning?

"Our Savior is the beta site for new approaches to empower our young people to succeed. Out of that setting, a template was developed. Soon, Rebecca's Garden of Hope was helping other congregations, providing them insight, training, assistance, and program materials to allow them to begin their own ministry.

"Through generous gifts from LWML, Rebecca's Garden provides a toolkit and other resources to congregations at no cost. We teach our partners how to use these tools to invite young people into God's family. At Our Savior, more than 300 children have been baptized since the program started. Six years ago we became an RSO (Recognized Service Organization) with the LCMS, which is how we could apply for the grant from the LWML."

How are the partner churches involved?

"More than 200 churches have signed our memorandum of understanding, with an intent to start an outreach program. About 65 of those partners currently have active ministries. Churches have the flexibility of using the information they need from the toolkit; there are a variety of ways to run the ministry. Some might have a couple tutors, others have 30 or 40 tutors. Some might be working with colleges or other congregations in a community.

"Our prayer is that all churches will consider this ministry to connect with their neighbors. Our partner churches have access to training and program materials; we will come out and canvas; and we will provide video support. We are actively sending out information to keep our partners abreast of some of the new things being introduced from an educational perspective and from a spiritual perspective."

How are individuals involved?

"RGOH partner congregations use many talented people to reach their neighbors. Our goal is to get more members of our congregations and local communities involved. There are needs for leaders to guide the program, cooks to feed the children and teach meal preparation, individuals to help teach life skills,

tutors to assist with learning, others to grade papers, and teachers and mentors to mirror the love and compassion of Christ, and so much more! That takes love from just saying, 'I love you,' into engaging in behavior that reflects what we're saying, because that's what Christ did for us."

How many persons are on staff?

"Rebecca's Garden of Hope operates with a voluntary director and voluntary governing board. I appreciate every opportunity I'm given to share information about this ministry with more people, which helps the ministry get the support it needs so it can continue to grow. My background is not education, and I have no formal training in working with non-profits, so this has all been Holy Spirit-driven and a series of trial and error. It's God working through me to accomplish His will. The ultimate goal is to share God's message of love with more youth and families through this ministry.

"The ten-member board is responsible for disseminating funds that we receive and staying in compliance with what a non-profit is supposed to do. Pastor Gregory Manning is the liaison between our partners and our board of directors. Our assistant to me, as director, is Pastor Larry Schaefer. We have several others who serve as support staff. These are all volunteers, but our strategy includes monetary support for these individuals down the road. Matthew 9:37 comes to mind when Jesus said to his disciples:

'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'"

How do volunteers contribute?

"I get up each day thanking God for each experience this ministry provides, and I am always asking God to involve more people in this ministry so more children and families can know Jesus. He is the ultimate gift we can share with others that keeps on giving for eternity.

"Each partner ministry has volunteers to support their ongoing efforts. For example, in our 65 active programs, there is an average of 10 tutors at each site. That's already 650 people! Add support staff to that, which includes van drivers, food preparers, and others, and we are easily into the thousands. Those individuals are impacting our communities and churches through this ministry. It's a ministry about combining the gifts God has given each of us to glorify Him. It is awesome!"

How has LWML impacted Rebecca's Garden of Hope?

"The support from LWML has been essential to the growth and development of our ministry. LWML has provided not only monetary support, but also other needed support to Rebecca's Garden of Hope in the form of gifts, supplies, and volunteers. The LWML is an

example of an outreach ministry that understands the value of coming together and being unified under one umbrella — Christ — so that we can accomplish His will. I'm humbled that you would not only pick us for this huge grant, but also that you would continue to provide support along the way as we've taken baby steps to understand what our purpose is through this ministry so that we can help more congregations reach more people in their communities. It doesn't get any better than that!



"Although I could go on and on, I will conclude by saying the most important part of my story is really my love for my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is out of that love that God calls me to love my neighbor as myself. That means I will continue to enthusiastically go wherever He leads me and continue to serve in His harvest field with great passion." Q

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The blessings of Rebecca's Garden of Hope reach far beyond the tutoring of underserved youth. The volunteer mentors and tutors return day after day, week after week, bringing the love of Jesus through word and action to children of all ages. Many tutors and support staff discover there are reciprocal blessings through interactions with the youth.

God continues to provide opportunities for Garden of Hope ministries to expand and reach into congregations and communities across the country:

- Incarnate Word in Tucker, Georgia, recently started a Garden of Hope ministry by inviting youth and families from the community to their first tutoring orientation. They were excited to get started.
- Mount Calvary in Warner Robbins, Georgia, has seen the impact of their ministries in their community. Pete LeBoriosis has been an important part of leading the charge with the church's outreach efforts to youth in the community.
- Pastor and Beth Wipperman have a Garden of Hope ministry at Our Savior Lutheran in Lake Worth, Florida, that includes a blanket ministry and various levels of support for those in need.
- Staff from Rebecca's Garden of Hope visited Lamb of God Lutheran Church in Slidell, Louisiana, which resulted in two more congregations signing up to start a Garden of Hope Ministry. To God be the Glory!

- Our Savior Lutheran, Orlando, Florida, has more than 20 youth in confirmation class. Confirmation is a great way to teach our youth about Christ. Equipping youth to go out and share God's message of love is what we are called to do. Having this level of commitment each week from these children, many of whom did not grow up in the church and don't have parents that make sure they come each week, says a lot about what God is doing in their lives. We are watering and planting, knowing God will cause the increase. What an awesome God we serve!

More information can be found at www.rebeccasgardenofhope.org.



Three youth recently baptized at Our Savior in Orlando

Dear Sanya and Pastor Larry,

The Rebecca's Garden of Hope Ministry is alive and well at Faith, Yerington! We are seeing the fruit of our labors, and it is soooo exciting! We have eight committed tutors, and our church was just selected to receive a DCE intern! I strongly believe that because of our well-rounded outreach programs that we already have in place, including RGOH, our church's application for a DCE Intern stood out from the pack.

I just survived one week of VBS. We had a record-breaking attendance this year — 52 kids! Eleven of those were kids from tutoring. We ended the event with one of our attendees wanting to be baptized, and we welcomed him into the family of God!

*Sincerely and in His Service,
Laura Tomac, Yerington, Nevada*



Two children [pictured above] were baptized at a recent Wednesday evening worship service a couple of weeks ago. They have been attending our tutoring program for a couple of years.

Roger Rehbein, St. Paul, Minnesota