



# CHURCHES ON A MISSION

Adams County churches are  
touching lives locally and globally.

By Karen Hendricks  
Photography by Casey Martin



Within Adams County, there are 76 churches—30 of which are located in Gettysburg. These places of worship not only provide spiritual guidance, but ministries and outreach often described as “life-changing,” “amazing,” or “love in action.” These ministries, many involving partner nonprofit organizations and charities, benefit numerous Adams County residents, but often touch the lives of countless others who live far beyond our county’s borders.

Focusing on four Adams County churches, we found the combined efforts of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, Freedom Valley Church, St. James Lutheran Church—all of Gettysburg—and Zion United Church of Christ, Arendtsville, totaled 166 forms of ministries. This list includes many projects you would commonly associate with churches—Boy Scout troops, schools, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens. But these four churches are also extending helping hands to others in extraordinary ways.

### Providing Hope, Transforming Lives

In 2001, during a leadership class at Freedom Valley Worship Center, Pastor Gerry Stoltzfoos asked participants to dream, to think about what they would be doing in their lives to minister to others if money were no object. Brandy Crago responded with an answer—therapeutic horse riding—and Stoltzfoos quickly offered her the use of the land surrounding the church, setting her dream into motion.

Crago, who already had equine experience, received further training through a certification program at Wilson College. She defines therapeutic riding as therapy that helps children and

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adults with physical, emotional, social, and cognitive needs through the healing power of horses.

Shining Stars Therapeutic Ministries opened in 2003 through a Sunday school program, then fully launched in 2004. Clients range in age from 3 years old to adults, and even “senior stars” from the Brethren Home, including a 99-year-old woman whose therapy includes driving a wheelchair-adapted carriage.

“It involves a huge amount of people...including pastors and leaders from many other community churches...250 volunteers per year...and we served 212 patients in 2015,” Crago details. “Many of our clients are kids with autism—on both ends of the spectrum...Others have anger issues. But, there’s something about the horses that calms them,” Crago says.

Stoltzfoos and Crago have witnessed transformations in clients’ lives, such as children talking or walking for the first time. “I love this ministry—I love that it involves lots of churches working together, and I love that we’re offering hope to families,” says Stoltzfoos. “It’s the most holy thing I’ve ever seen.”

### Helping Those “on the Edge”

At the back of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church is what’s commonly known as “the poor box,” a box where parishioners can give a dollar or two as they leave church. In 2015, donations via that simple box totaled \$11,000 according to Randy Parmentier, coordinator of the St. Vincent de Paul Committee at St. Francis.

Parmentier and four other volunteers staff the church Monday through Friday, fielding calls from area residents who reach out to the church in times of need. “People turn to us when their utilities are about to be turned off, for example,” says Parmentier.

After assessing the situation, money is often donated toward a utility bill, rent payment, medicine, or gift cards for grocery stores or gas stations. “It keeps people on the edge from falling off the edge,” says Parmentier. It’s a volunteer position that he considers his part-time position in retirement—and he’s been doing it for 11 years.

He remembers helping an elderly couple about to be evicted. Due to medical issues, their rent started backing up and they were three months late. Parmentier called the landlord who agreed to accept a donation of \$300 to prevent their eviction. “People often break down in tears—we get hugged a lot,” he says. “The fact that we can help, just a little, with compassion and dignity...we pray for them, and we spend a lot of time just listening.”

“The Catholic church has always been a church of immigrants, and people come to churches for help because that’s our basis—to use our faith to help those less fortunate,” he explains.





## JOHN'S MEALS

Every Friday, one of eight teams of volunteers—representing Zion United Church of Christ, Arendtsville, and seven area church partners—gather at Zion to fill backpacks with food, and deliver them to Arendtsville and Bendersville Elementary Schools. Nearly 90 children take them home for weekend meals such as microwaveable macaroni and cheese, plus snacks such as peanut butter crackers or fruit cups.

Known as John's Meals, the program honors the late John Raffensperger, who provided launching seed money, and is modeled after "Ruth's Harvest," operating in both Hanover and Gettysburg.

"We were shocked at how many kids are hungry in this area," Blocher says. "We realized food insecurity was a big issue. But we realized we couldn't do it alone... we invited other Upper Adams Churches to participate and were astounded at the response...It's been very exciting—a shot in the arm to all of our mission projects."

"To live out that mission is rewarding... to be able to use that money, with no overhead—100 percent of the money given is used to help others."

### A Project with a "Catch"

Zion United Church of Christ is located in Arendtsville, upper Adams County, surrounded by orchards, woods, and the winding Conewago Creek. "Zion's heritage—we were founded in 1787—is among the fruit growing population," says Pastor Kim Blocher. It's no wonder that some of the church's ministries today are firmly rooted in the area's natural resources, including its flowing streams.

Twice a year, Zion hosts a day of fishing for veterans from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, near Washington, D.C, coordinating with Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing based in Maryland. A church member with a fishing lodge above Adams County's "narrows" hosts the visits, which include about a dozen veterans plus family and staff. Zion church members volunteer, area Boy Scouts

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prepare lunch, and volunteer fishing guides work one-on-one with each veteran.

"For the veterans, it's a day off—a beautiful place to relax and learn some skills that will help them deal with traumatic situations. It helps them realize people are interested and concerned for them," Blocher says. She adds, "One year we had two young men in wheelchairs who had both lost both their legs—it was very powerful...We have a soft spot in our hearts here at Zion for veterans—they've served us and now we need to help them."

### "Life-Changing Impact"

About 100 children, in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, are involved in St. James Lutheran Church's youth programs. About 30 of them—middle and high school aged kids—embark upon Reach Mission Trips every summer to East Coast communities with a high



Members of Zion United Church of Christ, as well as area Boy Scouts, participate in a volunteer day of fly fishing for veterans. (Photo courtesy of Zion United Church of Christ)

concentration of low-income residents needing home repairs.

"I love 1 Timothy, chapter 4, verse 12—'Let no one look down on you because of your youth. Teach believers with your life: through your speech, conduct, love, and purity,'" says Sally Hoh, St. James Youth Pastor. "That's the foundation of our youth ministry program."

St. James partners with the organization Reach Mission Trips to put that verse into action. This summer, St. James will send youth to Fulton, N.Y., and Hurricane, W.Va. Coincidentally, Gettysburg has also been identified as a 2016 location—Hoh believes St. James youth will volunteer to set up staff operations, as they did last year when Reach hosted a mission location in nearby Scotland.

"It's a life-changing week of service with a powerful impact on the youth—not only doing the work, such as painting, roof repair, porch repair, or building wheelchair ramps—but engaging in personal and intensive faith-

# MANOS UNIDAS: HANDS UNITED

Imagine a photograph of two children walking, hand in hand, in a park. It was that image, framed and displayed in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg's office, that inspired the name of a nonprofit organization founded by Gettysburg's St. Francis Catholic Church as they worked hand-in-hand with other area organizations to assist Adams County's growing Hispanic community.

Amelia Contreras, director of Manos Unidas, says it was former Father Pistone who recognized a need to form a Hispanic-American center. "At the time we offered one Spanish mass. People started coming to him for services and it was overwhelming. He realized he could not translate for everyone,

find resources for everyone...and the Hispanic community was changing from being a migrant community to a more permanent community because more and more people were deciding to stay and reside here," Contreras recalls.

Contreras has served as director from day one, and has witnessed Manos Unidas' growth over the past 10 years, from nine volunteers to 23, from a budget of \$10,000 in year one to an operating budget today that's about \$50,000. The past few years, the organization has served between 2,300-2,500 people. Services include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, GED classes, information and referrals to community services and appointments, free tax preparation

services, an after-school program, a citizenship program, and much more.

"Language is not a barrier but an opportunity to learn from each other," Contreras says. "The beauty of it is (more and more of our programs) are serving the community in general. We have added programs to fill gaps in the community. We run on faith and prayer. And plenty of volunteers."

Rosalinda Lopez leads Manos Unidas' after-school program at the Vida School, where children eat healthy snacks and work on their homework.







Shining Stars Therapeutic Ministries offers children and adults with physical, emotional, social, and cognitive needs therapy through the healing power of horses.


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based discussions,” Hoh says. “It helps them assess whether what they say they believe is how they’re living their lives.”

The daily schedule includes seven hours of work and five hours of faith formation and study. Often, youth get to know the families that they’re helping, referred to as “neighbors.” Hoh says the word “neighbor” helps the kids realize they can help within their own community or across the country or globe.

“Jesus doesn’t define ‘neighbor’ as someone geographically close,” she says. “So we define ‘neighbor’ as people living in refugee camps, orphans in African

countries, or neighbors at their Reach work camp site.”

“As a Lutheran missionary kid born and raised in Japan who went on to serve in the Peace Corps, I feel as though the world is a very small place,” Hoh says. “I want the kids at St. James to have that same connection—that every kid in every corner of the world is as loved by God as they are.” 


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