

Cornerstone City Campus hopes to serve low-income families

Friday, September 5, 2008 7:12 AM CDT

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BLOOMINGTON -- Members of the Cornerstone Christian Academy began to pray about establishing an inner-city Christian-based school six years ago. That was before most of its first students, who started classes last week, were even born.

“We prayed for a private Christ-centered education for low-income families,” said Becky Shames, the academy’s administrator. “We’re thrilled it’s happening.”

The new Cornerstone Christian Academy City Campus opened Aug. 25 at Grace United Methodist Church, 806 E. Bell St., Bloomington, and symbolically completed a full circle in a 10-year period. The academy started with 45 preschool children at the same church in 1998, and has grown to 450 students at its new campus off Ireland Grove Road east of the city.

Now its new city campus is beginning with 10 students, six preschoolers and four kindergarten/first graders. Because the academy doesn’t offer bus service, it was designed to be accessible to the families in the neighborhood.

On Thursday, a black and yellow-striped bumblebee puppet helped preschoolers memorize Bible verses. Nearby in their own colorful room, kindergarten/first graders reviewed counting by twos and fives.

Lunch time is one of the favorite parts of the day for first grader Keyontae Hunter.

“I like the lady bugs and dragonflies too,” the 7-year-old said. Pictures of the insects are used in math which Hunter said he also enjoys.

The small class sizes allow teachers to address the “unique educational needs” of each student, Shames said.

Depending on family situation, students attending the city campus pay from nothing to \$250 monthly to attend the city campus, she said.

Last week, those students got an opportunity to visit the Ireland Grove Road campus. They arrived in their new 15-seat mini-bus with “400 students lining the driveway to greet them,” Shames said.

It was the first of monthly visits for city campus children to their larger sister school. Likewise, main



Cindy McNeilly, a teacher at Cornerstone Christian Academy's City Campus, used a puppet to make a point during a pre-kindergarten class, Thursday, September 4, 2008. (The Pantagraph, David Proeber)

campus kindergartners will visit the city campus periodically.

The new school was bolstered with a \$50,000 startup donation and has been blessed with other gifts, Shames said.

At one time, the academy thought a city campus could be based in the YMCA near Bloomington's city center when that organization planned to relocate. But the YMCA announced in July it would not be moving.

"We knew we were called to do this before the YMCA (location was a possibility). We were never contingent on starting at the Y," Shames said. Instead, they found a new location which turned out to be the church building that housed their very first classes a decade ago. "This church as been so wonderful," she said.

The school has an administrator on site daily, two teachers and volunteers working in the library and on other activities with the students.

"We pray for more students," Shames said, adding the city campus could teach a maximum of 22 students in the two classes this year. However, she said there are advantages to easing into the new program.

"Sometimes it's a blessing we started this small," she said.

Cornerstone Christian Academy City Campus

Purpose: To provide an affordable Christian-based education, with a focus on lower-income, city-based families.

Location: Grace United Methodist Church, 806 E. Bell St., Bloomington

Hours: 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m.

Students: Currently 10; room for 22 students this year. Registration continues.

History: Cornerstone Christian Academy opened in 1998 with 45 preschoolers at the same church site. It has grown to 450 preschool-through-high school students, and a main campus located off Ireland Grove Road in Bloomington.

Future plans: To expand and relocate the city campus to a site further west; the hope is children who start at city campus will eventually attend higher grades at the main campus.

More information: (309) 662-9900 or visit www.cornerstonechristian.com