For six consecutive weeks this past summer, twelve neighborhood youth gathered each Tuesday at Hope Lutheran Church in Reading to participate in service projects, team building exercises, education in life skills, and worship. The vision of "M.A.D. H.O.P.E." (Making A Difference, Helping Other People Everyday) grew out of conversations between Pr. Mary Wolfe of Hope and the young people who frequent the church's programs. Youth noted that over the summer there are plenty of activities for children in the neighborhood, but few opportunities for Middle and Senior High youth. Church leaders also recognized that the city young people often lack mentors who can teach them such basic skills as how to complete a resume, how to dress for work, and how to conduct themselves in a workplace.

Tuesday's at M.A.D. H.O.P.E. began with Pr. Wolfe, and Leanna Hassler, the congregation's Neighborhood Outreach Coordinator, gathering with participants for a group devotion after which the young people prepared their own lunches, learning basic cooking skills. Following lunch, a service project in the community or church kept the youth busy working as a team while at the same time improving their neighborhood. A fun fitness activity followed service. The day concluded with helping to set up for and participate in the meal and worship experience of Hope's Table, a ministry of hospitality to area poor and homeless residents. For their participation, the young people were paid a small salary that was banked until the end of the six-week experience. At that time they and Pr. Wolfe went shopping for school clothing and supplies. While shopping as a group at the Berkshire Mall, the youth told store clerks how they had earned the money. One woman who overheard the story of Hope church's impact on the young people, gave the pastor a five-dollar bill to help pay for some snacks.

This was a wonderful experience of the church connecting with and making a difference in the daily lives of its neighbors. Hope Lutheran Church and the participants in M.A.D. H.O.P.E. appreciate the financial support they received from their partners in ministry in the Northeastern Pennsylvania Synod through a grant from the Witness and Service Ministry Team.

BY: Pastor Mary E. Wolfe

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