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Sylvia Ricks, left, First Baptist Church's Family Life Center Director Sarah Smilie, Sophia Robinson and Mara Ricks all play games on the computers during KidZone earlier this week. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

Church offers afterschool option for children

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

With its handsome, light brick edifice and immaculately-kept grounds, First Baptist Church occupies an entire city block on Second Street between Pershing and Sherman Avenues. Most days, the facility sits quiet. However, that's about to change. On the northeast corner, the church's Family Life Center offers an abundance of resources to the community — and a new program at First Baptist aims to make the words “family” and “life” an everyday reality.

KidZone, an afterschool program for students in first to sixth grades, started the first week in October, and already it has brought more foot traffic to the Family Life Center, said director Sarah Smilie.

“From what I’ve been told, there was a time when the church had a great outreach to the community, and it was known that people could just come and hang out,” she said. “That’s what we want to get back to: a church that’s open to the community, and not just open on Sundays.”



In keeping with that goal, KidZone will be up and running from 3:30 to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, at the church’s Family Life Center. Fees for the program are \$5 per student per day, with extra fees for elective classes, although regular activities at no cost beyond the daily fee are always available.

Volunteer adults and youth, along with church ministry staff oversee the programs, and all workers are required to pass background checks.

Children who attend KidZone after school might take advantage of academic tutoring, play in the church’s gym or participate in structured group activities. An “Impact” session for all ages includes show-and-tell, character-building lessons, science experiments, organized games, computer-based activities and more. Students may also sign up for elective classes of their choice.

Among the electives scheduled thus far are robotics classes, music lessons, art studio and dance class. The classes are scheduled to run about a month, then switch out as more subjects, teachers and students cycle through.

“They’ll be constantly changing, which is kind of exciting,” Smilie said.

All the activities, Smilie noted, are designed to bridge the gap between children, families and church by providing learning opportunities for all ages.

“They can bring their siblings, family members, parents, grandparents to take the elective classes,” Smilie said. Besides the organized activities, students and families are welcome to simply “hang out” at the Family Life Center.

“They can stay after (regular classes), use our facility, use the basketball court, play board games, whatever appeals to them,” said Smilie.

Smilie said KidZone builds upon her experience at an afterschool program operated by LifeBridge Community in Indianapolis.

“Families from lower-income areas in Indianapolis use Life Bridge as a resource for their children afterschool. It assisted the children in their academics while implementing Christ through fully involved volunteers,” Smilie said. “We just reached out to show love. The main thing, we realized, was providing a way for kids to be in a safe environment when their parents were at work.”

First Baptist pastor Loren Robinson saw similar needs in Liberal.

“He contacted me to ask if I’d be interested in doing something here,” Smilie said. “After I prayed about it, I felt God leading me to say ‘yes,’ so I stopped my whole life in Indiana and moved here.”

In the past two months, Smilie has built the KidZone program from the ground up, focusing on

the dual goals of providing a safe environment and showing love.

“We’ve tried to structure the programs around what families need, rather than having any certain agenda,” Smilie said. To that end, she keeps flexible office hours in the church in order to be available to the public, and she makes an effort to get to know, and communicate with, parents of the KidZone participants.

“I love interactions with people — that’s the best part of my job — and I love helping parents figure out what’s best for their kids and their families,” she said. “It’s important to have that close relationship with the parents.

“Everyone I’ve talked to is really excited,” Smilie said. “This is not a concept the city has had yet, as far as churches go. The schools do a wonderful job offering afterschool programs, but as far as a longer time period, and Fridays, that’s a positive thing.”

The only hiccup so far, she noted, “is getting the word out. I really think that once the community understands this is an option, families, parents, kids are going to be really excited.”

At this point, KidZone has not been added to the USD No. 480 transportation schedule as a drop-off point. That means families and students still have to arrange a way to get to KidZone after school. Once there, students will be in good hands, not only safe but happily engaged in meaningful activities.

“We’re working and hoping that we can eventually offer some kind of transportation system, but that might take a while,” Smilie said. “We’re hoping to have something worked out in November.”

Despite delays in smoothing out such details, Smilie is optimistic the community will embrace KidZone.

“In the long run, I think it’s going to be completely successful,” she said. “Right now, we’re in the building stage. When we get everything in place, it’s going to be great.”

For information about enrolling in KidZone, contact Smilie at First Baptist Church, 204 N. Sherman Ave., 624-1641.

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