



Children are playing Tuesday at First Presbyterian Church’s Childcare Center and Preschool. For more information, call 624-1616. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

New facility provides childcare option

By RACHEL COLEMAN

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Rain dripped off the rust-colored leaves on a sturdy oak tree, but that was the only motion visible in the play area to the east of First Presbyterian Church in Liberal. The sandbox turtles were closed, the play equipment stood empty; all the children at First Presbyterian Childcare Center and Preschool were inside the building, keeping warm and dry — and full of energy.

“I’m Spiderman!” announced a preschool boy, jumping back and forth across the hallway.

“I’m a Pink Girl Spiderman!” said a girl, leaping into his path.

“It’s time to wash your hands,” their teacher said firmly, leading them toward the restrooms.

Inside the church fellowship hall, newly decorated with a colorful mural, other children polished off the remains of Tuesday’s hot lunch — hot dogs, baked beans, fruit and milk.

“Look! I scribbled ketchup on my hot dog!” a boy said gleefully. “It’s all messy.”

In the world of preschool people, his abandonment of table manners was par for the course. But the fact that it’s business as usual at the FPCC is a miracle of determination in the face of discouragement, said director Becky Pfenninger.

One year ago, Pfenninger and her coworkers operated the daycare and preschool at First Baptist Church across town. When the closure of that service was announced to the public in the spring of 2013, shock and dismay were soon replaced by hope.

“Almost immediately there were people jumping all over it, trying to brainstorm a solution,” she said. With the help of local school board member Tammy Sutherland-Abbott, Pfenninger talked to three or four different churches in town, and looked at various possibilities for a new location.

“It was stressful,” she said. “The other employees and I still wanted to run a daycare facility, we wanted the children to have a place where they could feel safe. But we didn’t know how to make it work.”

That’s where First Presbyterian stepped in. The church, located at 1551 N. Western, possessed roomy facilities that were, some members felt, underutilized due to shrinking membership. In July, the church body voted to open a childcare facility, and the work began. Sunday school rooms that looked a little forlorn a few months ago have now been transformed with bright-colored paint, sturdy shelving packed with toys and games, and the sounds of young

voices.

Pffeninger likes the new facility, noting that its compact layout and size feel more manageable, especially for small children.

“They don’t have to walk as far to get from one area to the next, and it’s easier to find people,” she said.

When the group came to First Presbyterian Church, Sutherland-Abbott recalled, “there was no money to get things ready, so we did it with blood, sweat, community members donating their time, and very minimal funds.”

The schedule was challenging, as the new daycare raced the calendar.

“The church gave us permission partway through the summer, and then we had to do the set-up, pass the inspections with the fire marshall and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and all that took us right up to the week before school began,” said Pffeninger. “It’s calmed down a little, but we still have a lot of toys, games and craft supplies packed up in boxes.”

The rapid transition took its toll in other ways. Although many children from the old preschool migrated with their teachers, others found home daycare providers or moved to a family-based care situation for afterschool hours.

“Families needed to have a plan in place further ahead of time,” Pffeninger said.

So far, the new facility serves about 40 children, ages two to fifth grade. That’s about half the number of the children served at the former location, but Pffeninger expects to increase enrollment.

“We are licensed for 75,” she said, “and when we reach those larger numbers, I’ll definitely have to add staff.”

For now, First Presbyterian Child Care and Preschool employs eight teachers, with staggered shifts that run from 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The kitchen at Seward County Community College prepares the meals for the children — breakfast, lunch and a snack, and the daycare workers serve and monitor mealtime.

Pfenninger and her team have divided the children into age groups of “early learners,” for ages two and a half (all attendees must be potty-trained) through three or four years; preschoolers ages four and five; kindergarten students, who spend the portion of their day before or after public school at the daycare center; and first- through fifth-graders, who arrive once public school is dismissed.

“Right now our biggest groups are the two youngest ages,” said Pfenninger. “We’re getting the daycare established, then we’ll focus on the preschool. We’re hoping that by January we’ll be ready to get that up and running.”

The caregivers are already incorporating a lot of what they did in the old preschool as part of the daily activities for the young children. Children have free-play time indoors, and when weather permits, outdoors. They also interact with teachers to learn their letters, numbers, shapes, colors, calendar knowledge, writing names, cutting, gluing and more. They participate in activities like painting, play-dough, sensory games, and various types of blocks, imaginative play and music.

The children recently paid a visit to the nearby Wheatridge Park nursing home, where they sang, danced and enjoyed popcorn and snacks with the residents. In the future, Pfenninger said the children will interact with residents at Good Samaritan Center as well.

“Over there, it’s usually a combination of activities – games, parachute activities, instruments, singing,” she said.

While the establishment of a new daycare and preschool in town has been a godsend for families with young children, it's also proven to be a blessing for its host church.

"Everyone has stepped up and taken ownership," Sutherland-Abbott said. "It's been really great to see, especially since we're in transition and between pastors right now."

For her part, Pfenninger said the new daycare is not only an answer to her wishes as a daycare professional, it has renewed her faith in her community.

"It's been amazing, how people have donated their time, effort, money, supplies," she said. "It makes me so glad to see how people in the community can come together to make something important like this work."

For information about First Presbyterian Child Care and Preschool, call 624-1616.