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| <p>A Look at How God is Still Speaking in the Massachusetts Conference</p> | | |
| <p>November 19, 2008</p> | | |

First Congregational Church of Stoneham Gets an "A" for Effort

Volunteers offer tutoring in English as a second language

How many forms have you filled out recently for your health care needs or children's education? Did you have to write up a resume for a job opportunity? Do you read the labels of food items? Well as many as 46% of Massachusetts adults don't perform these tasks because they cannot. They struggle with the most basic literacy tasks -- and a high percentage of these adults are immigrants.*

The demographics of Stoneham have been changing over the past decade. The population has become more culturally diverse and the members of the [First Congregational Church in Stoneham](#) Mission Committee were brainstorming ideas of how to better reach the community. They decided to focus on helping the growing number of adults needing to learn English or improve their literacy skills.

They reached out to the town and to churches in the area via letters and phone calls. They named their task force "Stoneham English for All" and partnered with a non-profit organization called "[English at Large](#)" which gets support from the Department of Education. The first meeting, hosted by First Congregational in the church parlor, was attended by members of neighboring churches, the town librarian and the superintendent of



With the help of a tutoring program jumpstarted by First Congregational Church in Stoneham, adults who struggle with the English language, are able to communicate more successfully in their daily lives.

[stock photo]

schools. Enthusiasm was sparked.

English At Large provides free, practical, and accessible English literacy instruction to adults in 20 Boston area communities. Their goal is to ensure that all adults possess the basic skills they need to attain economic self-sufficiency, support their families, and become fully engaged in their community.

"The children learn English in school, but many towns cannot afford to offer English classes for the adults," said Ben Jacques, a member of the Missions Committee and project coordinator. "So we decided to play the catalyst role -- to be the stimulus for a community-wide effort."

Over several months, the group recruited both tutors and learners of various cultures. Members visited area businesses to let the owners, managers and workers know of the program, and advertised it with posters at the Library and bulletin inserts at three churches. The tutors were required to give a one-year commitment as well as participate in and graduate from an English At Large training program before they could be assigned. This fall, 22 volunteers, including four from First Congregational Church, received certification and were matched with adult learners.

All referrals are coordinated through English at Large. Learners are assessed for level of speaking, reading, and writing, and then matched with a tutor. The tutors and learners, who usually meet one to three hours per week, work out a schedule around work and family commitments. Jacques believes that coordinating tutoring around the learners' work schedules is especially important. Many learners have more than one job but are anxious to be taught the language. Jacques reports that the volunteers, who are also from varied backgrounds, are just as excited to learn about other cultures.

"We were surprised to find out that half of those requesting tutors are college-educated in their countries of origin," said Jacques. "We have retired physicians from the Ukraine who came here to live with their children. They felt unconnected culturally and wanted to be able to fit better in the community. We have one person from China who wants to be able to communicate better with her child's teachers. And we have another person who owns her own cleaning business, but struggles with forms, medical paperwork, and in being able to interact with her business associates."

The learners, however, do have one thing in common. "They are all eager and highly motivated to learn," Jacques said. "It's also a way of sharing language and culture in which both tutors and learners are enriched."

The Mission Committee raises money through its coffee hour fundraisers to support the program. Educational materials, like workbooks and assessment tools are always needed. And the group is looking to buy interactive software programs for the town library so people can practice during library hours.

"When I heard some anti-immigration comments in the community, it hit me that I should look at what my religion says about it," said Jacques. "And I realized our response of welcome and kindness to newcomers should also apply to those from other countries."

As a result, First Congregational Church of Stoneham gives a practical welcome not only to all who enter the church, but also to all who enter the country.

For more information about English at Large, visit www.englishatlarge.org. You

can contact Ben Jacques through the First Congregational Church in Stoneham church office at (781) 438-0097 or firstchurchstoneham@verizon.net.

*According to *English at Large*, www.englishatlarge.org.

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