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## Reaching out to little children

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Faith community brought into birth to age 5 initiative that targets poverty

**BY DAWN BAUMGARTNER VAUGHAN**

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**DURHAM --** The first five years of a child's life are critical for their future success. End Poverty Durham and Durham's Partnership for Children have formed a collaboration to get the faith community involved with children from birth to age five with the Early Childhood Faith Initiative.

The first years of life are critical for brain development in terms of cognition as well as social and emotional development.

"All the work we do in the beginning sets the stage for our success," said Marsha Basloe of Durham's Partnership for Children, a nonprofit Smart Start initiative.

The first meeting was held Thursday morning at St. Philip's Episcopal Church downtown, as a way of sharing information and urging congregations to become more involved. It has been a few years in the making as collaborators sought funding, hired faith initiative coordinator Winnie Morgan and surveyed 50 Durham congregations about what kind of programs they have in place for children ages birth to five. Some of those congregations shared what they do with clergy, laity and others at Thursday's meeting.

Ways to reach out to young children may be as simple as providing classroom space to outside parenting groups or as involved as hosting a daycare, both of which First Presbyterian Church does.

"If you have the room and play space, it's a wonderful thing to share," said Rev. Marilyn Hedgpeh of First Presbyterian. Her church also uses Sunday school storytellers and musicians to engage little ones.

At Trinity Avenue Presbyterian, the church has adopted the Scarborough Nursery School and held fundraisers, shared holiday parties and gotten the church's children involved with helping the school. Sloane Nuernberger, director of children's ministries at Trinity Avenue, said that their ultimate goal is for the church children to share social events with the daycare so that parents can mingle as well.

At Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, a Latino parents' playgroup brings together children, parents and parenting mentors to interact together each week. Playgroup facilitator Katushka Olave said they encourage parents and children to learn together.

Molly Reingruber at St. Philip's Episcopal said that her church involves children in casual worship services held in the parish hall by giving them the opportunity for hands on learning about the Eucharist and prayer.

"There are easy ways to start developing and nurturing younger children," Reingruber said, and urged other congregations to find their own ways to reach out.

Reaching out to little children is key to their future. Twenty-three percent of Durham children live in poverty.

"This is shameful and unacceptable and in the faith community we can do something about it," said the Rev. Mel Williams of Watts Street Baptist Church. It is a mission the faith community has been called to answer, he said. He and community volunteer Ann Stock of End Poverty Durham have led the effort.

The Rev. Jim Horton of the Church of the Advent in Williamston and a board member of the North Carolina Partnership for Children, suggested congregations host parenting classes, offer parent mentors, take time to read to children and explain things in complete sentences. He urged them to be strong advocates for the birth to age five community. We have a responsibility, he said, to tell the government that it is not acceptable for any child in North Carolina to suffer, and funding early childhood programs is important.

"No person has all the answers," Horton said. "We are called to seek and assure justice for



these children."

For information about the Early Childhood Faith Initiative, visit [www.dpfc.net/EarlyChildhoodFaithInitiative.aspx](http://www.dpfc.net/EarlyChildhoodFaithInitiative.aspx) or [www.endpovertydurham.org](http://www.endpovertydurham.org) or call (919) 403-6960.

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