

# Religion

## Levy United Methodist Welcoming efforts earn church praise

By Christy L. Smith  
Staff Writer

Thad and Marcy Eckolls of North Little Rock visited numerous worship centers five years ago when they were searching for a new church home. But it didn't take long for the couple to settle on Levy United Methodist Church.

"We were warmly greeted and encouraged to come back," Thad Eckolls said of that first Sunday morning he and his wife walked into the quaint, brick building on West 47th Street to see if the worship services there were well-suited to their particular fellowship needs.

But efforts to welcome the couple didn't stop after that morning's sermon.

The following week the couple got a visit not only from the pastor but also from the church's lay leader, Jim Lane, and his wife, Nell. And those social calls went a long way in prompting the couple to join Levy United Methodist.

Such efforts to embrace prospective members as well as the formation of special programs to address the needs of its neighbors have earned the church the tag "Welcoming Congregation," a designation doled out each year to a handful of United Methodist churches by the denomination's official communications agency.

And, after hours spent brainstorming on just how to make visitors feel more welcome, church leaders couldn't be happier with their new designation, said lay leader Lane.

"We are pleased that our congregation is a part of this welcoming effort by our denomination and its members," he said in a press release.

Lane further noted that the church has had more than 1,000 visitors in the last eight years, when the church started a whole slate of new programs, such as a weekly wellness clinic, and congregants began making special efforts to embrace guests.

Just 126 United Methodist churches across the country currently are recognized as "Welcoming Congregations" and only three of those are located in Arkansas — First



PHOTOS BY DAVID BORENGASSER AND KATHRYN WILSON

Above: The congregation of Levy United Methodist Church has welcomed more than 1,000 visitors in the last eight years. Right: Usher Cindy Lang hands a program and gives directions to Allie Ridgeway last Sunday morning.

United Methodist of Harrison, Goddard United Methodist in Fort Smith and now Levy United Methodist.

The recognition program is part of a larger effort launched in 2000 "to use modern technology and the common language of television to spread the good news of Christ to a world in need," according to a press release.

And Levy United Methodist has certainly been using modern technology to its advantage.

The church tapes the sermon every Sunday morning, and then distributes them to shut-ins. Its web site, which is written in English as well as Spanish, features an audio stream of Sunday sermons and soon may include a video stream so internet users can watch the services online.

Toss in the special visitor booklets describing each ministry, the Mother's Day Out and after-school care programs, and the wellness clinic, and it's easy to see why Levy United Methodist was chosen as a "Welcoming Congregation." However, the church must continue working if it wants to keep that designation, and several new programs already are in the works, including a special



Vacation Bible School just for Spanish-speaking residents.

After all, Lane said, one of Levy United Methodist's top goals is to be a "good neighbor" to everyone who lives and works around it.