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In Lebanon, girls sip tea and learn scripture with Granny G

Elizabeth "Granny G" Gillespie hosts tea parties for elementary-age girls at Lebanon Memorial United Methodist Church.

By Annette Bender

LEBANON, Va. – A year ago, Elizabeth Gillespie started thinking about the little girls at Lebanon Memorial United Methodist Church. She wanted them to learn Bible verses that would guide them through life.

Then Gillespie remembered a tea set given to her when she was four years old, and how much she cherished it over the years. She wondered: Would the girls be inspired to learn verses at monthly tea parties – with the promise of each child receiving her own tea set at the end of the year?

With the help of Lebanon Memorial's United Methodist Women, Gillespie's idea has developed into a ministry that has captured the hearts of elementary-age girls at the Abingdon District church.

"We Methodists don't tend to emphasize memorization very much," 89-year-old Gillespie, known to the children as "Granny G," explained recently. "I thought it would be wonderful if they could learn scripture that would last them all their lives."

It all started last fall, when the Joy Circle set up tea parties in different homes. Girls were invited to parties where, in addition to nibbling tiny sandwiches and sipping from dainty cups, they received four verses to learn for the following month's party.

The guests dine on tableware they'll soon earn by reciting a year's worth of scripture.

At a party in March, the girls made pinwheels, gluing a verse to each "spoke" to help them remember the words. Then, lining up in front of a proud Granny G, they recited the previous month's verses. Each party has a different theme. For example, in February the theme was "love" and the Bible verses were love-based. In March, the theme was "wind" and the verses related to the Holy Spirit.

After the crafts and verses, the girls gathered around picture-pretty tables, set with the teapots they'll acquire in May. The guests looked suspiciously at ham sandwiches topped with decorative slivers of tomatoes ("You don't like tomatoes?" Gillespie asked incredulously). But they delighted in the sugar-encrusted cookies and mini-cups of tea.

"It's fun," said Nora Burkett, age 11. "Everything's little."

Meanwhile, the United Methodist Women worked quietly, pouring tea and smiling at the interaction between Granny G and the girls. When the tea parties are complete, they plan to teach scripture to other children in the church. Jamie Rexrode, who Gillespie credits for doing most of the tea party work, already has a new idea.

"We need to do something equivalent for the little boys," she said. "Maybe something with fishing in the summertime." ■

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