

Just Neighbors Award February 2014

Presented by:

Compassion, Peace & Justice Task Force of the Presbytery of Des Moines

Presented to:

**First Presbyterian Church, Perry
for engaging in compassion, peace and justice ministry in their community as a
Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Site. (VITA)**

First Church, Perry, has been a VITA Site for 5 years and counting. VITA is a Program sponsored by the IRS. Its purpose is to offer free tax help to people who make \$52,000 or less and need assistance in preparing their own tax returns[1].

The IRS provides training and certification to volunteers, who then provide free basic income tax return preparation with electronic filing to qualified individuals in local communities. They can inform taxpayers about special tax credits for which they may qualify such as Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, and Credit for the Elderly or the Disabled. Many low-income folks are not aware of their tax obligations or their eligibility for credits. Navigating the tax code and filing requirements is a difficult and confusing process for many, if not most of us. But, without assistance, it can be an insurmountable obstacle, especially for some who have cognitive disabilities, limited education, are non-English speakers, or who are consumed by the pressures of trying to support a family on low wages.

According to 2010 Census data[2], the number of low-income households in Perry is 5% higher than the state average. The median household income is \$10,000 less than the state average. 35% of the population is Hispanic, and almost the same numbers of households speak a language other than English at home. There is certainly a need in their community, and the people of First Church, Perry has responded.

When they first launched this program 5 years ago, First Perry served 40 families. Last year, nearly 200 families from their community walked through the church doors, resulting in close to \$300,000 in federal refunds and \$100,000 in State refunds.

Grants and training are provided by the IRS to run the program, so it doesn't cost the church a thing. The church organizes the volunteers and administers the program. They also provide hospitality, which, as a ministry, they see as just as important as providing accurate tax returns. Donations cover the cost of comfortable seating, a tv, toys and bilingual books for the kids, diaper changing station, nutritious snacks and drinks. The Perry Ministerial Association and community at-large helped start this project and continue to support the congregation as they provide this service to the community.

Assistance is offered in English and Spanish, and other languages when needed. They also try to provide bilingual greeters so that people feel welcome and at ease. The tax-preparers make it clear that they do not care about immigration statues. Help is provided to file taxes legally, and undocumented immigrants are never reported. It is noted that one year they served more undocumented Canadians than Latinos. First, Perry is also one of only a few sites that will prepare



Chuck & Deb McCloud are shown accepting the award on behalf of the church from Rev. Michelle Parsons.

taxes for previous years

“Laughter,” “trust,” “caring,” “friendship,” “relaxed”...these are not often words associated with taxes or tax preparation sites. And yet, these words describe the environment First Church, Perry, provides for the taxpayers they serve. In a poor community, in a field where scams are common, with a population of people who are used to being scammed, First Church has created a refuge of trust and care, where folks know they can come and receive real help. This has become a tangible way the church can put money directly into the hands of the working poor. Over time, volunteers have developed friendships with the people they serve, they are watching the kids grow up and the families become financially stronger.

An inspector once commented about the site: “the expression on the faces of our taxpayers did not reflect any anxiety, laughter was common and the people really seemed to enjoy filing their taxes!” Who among us can say that about our tax preparation? Well done, First Presbyterian Church, Perry!

[1] www.irs.gov

[2] www.census.gov