



## Backpack BLESSings

# GENESEO BACKPACK PROGRAM

The Geneseo Backpack Program is a new local mission of First United Methodist Church being implemented in the Geneseo School District to address the needs of children living in extreme poverty (families with an income less than 50% of the federal poverty level). This program was organized in partnership with the Geneseo School District and was initiated in March 2011. It is coordinated and supported by volunteers of all faiths and caring members of our community.

The reality of hungry children in our school district has inspired and motivated the program to take shape. The national average of children living in extreme poverty is 9%, according to the National Center for Children in Poverty, March 2011. The State of Illinois determines this number to be at 6%. Our average in Geneseo is lower, but is alarming at 2.7%, according to <http://www.city-data.com/>.

The Geneseo Backpack Program provides nutritious kid friendly food to children who live in "food insecure" households (households without consistent access to food) to get them through the weekend when school breakfast and lunch are not available. *This program is at no cost to the child.* The number of children who are recipients of the program are identified by the school counselors, teachers, school nurse as needing food assist through the weekend. They give a number to the program coordinator. There is no disclosure of names.

The Geneseo Backpack Program fills a gallon plastic bag with 6-8 food items such as granola bars, cereal bars, cereal, canned fruit, milk, instant oatmeal, and canned meals such as stew, soup, or ravioli. The bags are delivered weekly. The school then discreetly places the bag in the child's backpack on the last day of school each week and prior to holiday weekends. Fareway Foods is supplying the food at cost; a few items come from the River Bend Food Bank.

Geneseo Backpack Program has been operating since March, 2011. 46 students were served the first week; 51 students were being served by the end of school year in May. For the school year 2011-2012, the program served initially 50 students, and ended the year with a number of 62. The number changes for different reasons. Any student needing food is included. But there are also transitional issues for students such as a sick parent, temporary homeless situation, or loss of parents' income which may be helped with extra food for the student on weekends. Summer backpacks were added May 2012 with 24 students participating. The goal is to be consistent with weekly food supplement throughout the year.

Anyone who wants to help in any way—packing and delivering bags is welcome. Fund raising and increasing awareness are also important in continuing the program, since it is supported by donation only. Anyone wishing to help in these areas is also needed.

The cost of a bag per week for each child is approximately \$6.50. The Geneseo Backpack Program hopes donors will consider feeding a child for a week, month, or year. All moneys go directly to purchase food and bags. All schools in the Geneseo District are served. Donations may be made to First United Methodist Church, earmarked "Geneseo Backpack Blessings Program".

For more information or to volunteer, call Sheryle Vergane, 309-236-6655 or Kathy McClimon, 309-944-5434.