

Impact of second-grade teacher drives pastor's passion to serve

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DECATUR, Ga. (BP)—Church planter and pastor Emory Berry Jr.'s passion for serving the educational community has its roots in his second-grade public school teacher of decades ago.

Berry, who holds a doctorate in theology, had begun Lillie Courtney's second-grade class at Palmetto Elementary School in Pinecrest, Fla., as the lowest-ranking student in reading comprehension.

"This teacher could have easily labeled me and put me in special classes, remedial classes, but she took a personal investment," said Berry, founding pastor of The Favor Church, said of Courtney. "I guess she saw the potential was there, but I did not have the skillset. And she worked with me and worked with me.

"By the time I finished the second grade, I was still in a reading group by myself, but now I was in the highest reading group. So, I experienced incredible gains with my literacy because this one teacher took an investment in me," he said. "I know the power of educators. She helped give me a hunger or taste for achievement."

Berry counts nearly 20 active and retired educators and school administrators among the 100 or so worshipers who attend The Favor Church, which Berry planted at Easter. They include his wife Julie Ann Berry who is an assistant principal. The church sees the three local public schools in its community as a mission field.

"We are really loaded with people who have worked in the educational system," he said. "They have a huge passion for education."

Hosted cookout for educators



Emory Berry, founding pastor of The Favor Church in Decatur, Ga., buys supplies for a cookout the church hosted for the staff of Mary McLeod Bethune Middle School. (Submitted photo)

Aug. 5 at Mary McLeod Bethune Middle School, Berry and a group of church volunteers hosted a cookout for the 100 school teachers and staff members, cooking and serving food, encouraging educators and sharing literature on the church. The outreach spurred motivational conversations, Berry said.

“I wish more churches did this,” Berry quoted Bethune teachers. “Some said, ‘I want to take this back to my church.’ Everything from that to, ‘You know, I’ve been looking for a church home.’ A couple of people opened up about some personal things, you know, ‘If you all don’t mind, could you pray for me?’”

On July 16, The Favor Church hosted a back-to-school cookout and celebration for area elementary through high school students, featuring hot

food, snacks, bounce houses, a DJ, games and giveaways including about 200 backpacks of school supplies. Donations from church members and supporters from six states and Washington, D.C., funded the outreach, Berry said.

During the 2022-2023 school year, the church will host free weekly tutoring classes at the church in various subjects, utilizing retired educators and professionals from applicable careers. Church members will volunteer as literacy coaches or book buddies at the local elementary school to improve literacy, and offer outreach to teach parents to better equip their children to succeed educationally.

Berry also is teaching youth in the church to see school as a mission field where students can build relationships, share Christ, invite classmates to church, and model Christian behavior that resolves conflicts and discourages bullying.

“School is a mission field where they can interact with their peers and learn how to relate one to another in a way that may not be consistent with how the world teaches,” Berry said. “It’s a great way for them to share Christ with their friends, so it’s an evangelistic opportunity.”

Having launched this past Easter and meeting at no cost on the Greater Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church campus, the church is able to use more resources for outreach.

Invest in the future of children

Churches have opportunities to invest in children’s futures and help them succeed, thereby giving them platforms to share the gospel, Berry said.

“We want the community to know that we are invested in their future, particularly the children,” Berry said. “We’re invested in their families.

Secondly, we want to be, obviously, the hands and feet of Christ. We have been blessed and we want to be a blessing.

“That’s where our name (rests). The Favor Church, where we are experiencing the favor of God and we’re sharing the favor of God.”

As students excel, “their trajectory can be more positive, where they can go on to do something meaningful because academically, they were ready.”

Berry often tells the story of his second-grade teacher Courtney, who still lives in south Florida. During his childhood, she was his Bible study teacher at Second Baptist Church of Richmond Heights in Miami, Fla.

“Ms. Courtney was not only my second-grade teacher at the public school, but I would see Ms. Courtney on Wednesdays in Bible study.”

As motivation for learning the names of Bible books, memorizing Scripture and telling Bible stories and parables, Courtney offered what Berry calls “Big 60 cookies,” because they came 60 to a pack.

“For us kids, you would have thought those were the double-stuffed Oreos,” he said. “We wanted to master those books so we could get some of those cookies.”

Berry describes his mother Julie Lynette Berry as an “advocate for education” who “has been a positive force” in his educational philosophy, but also credits Courtney as part of the foundation that helped him succeed.

He is among the prestigious Dr. Martin Luther King International Board of Preachers at Morehouse College, is pursuing his second doctorate degree, and just released his latest book, *Facts About Favor: Principles That Will Change Your Life*.

“All of that’s possible because I had a second-grade teacher who didn’t

allow me to be cast aside, but she invested in me,” he said. “And thanks be to God, I’ve been able to touch thousands of lives. But if she didn’t make that investment, I don’t know, my life probably would have taken a different trajectory.”