

## Micah 6: The Bonner Connection

*by Julie Murphy, Ministry Advisor*

### Purpose

- Develops partnerships between the college and local congregations to engage students and congregation members in social justice, service, and spiritual enrichment.

### Background

Inspired by the challenge of scripture in Micah 6:8, “And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” The Micah 6 project, an approach to congregational and community justices ministries, was initiated in 1999 as a pilot project by the National Council of Churches in Christ (NCCC) and the Bonner Foundation. Rhodes participated as a “congregation” in the pilot project and initiated a college-based Micah 6 project, when chaplain Newton challenged students to partner with local churches to address issues of poverty and injustice in Memphis. Supported by a Bonner enrichment grant, the chaplain’s staff drew together interested students and church leaders to form Micah 6 teams. Each team committed to a two-year community project and received a mini-grant of \$500-\$2000.

Three of the first projects have continued as part of Rhodes’ current Micah 6: Bonner Connection project. They are comprised of an urban scouting program, nonviolence education, and tutoring services. The project has expanded to include the Crestmere Servant Leader House. Ten colleges and congregational partners now participate in the Bonner Foundation’s Micah 6 Bonner Partnership program, addressing issues of faith and justice in their communities.

Early projects in Memphis included:

- Supporting cancer patients at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.
- Teaching English as a second language to recent immigrants.
- Offering nonviolence education to children in one of the most violent areas of Memphis.
- Offering a multi-location tutoring and Bible study program and a year-end celebration for all participating children.
- Starting a Girl Scout troop for urban children with no other access to scouting activities.
- Offering a center for servant leadership.

In 2000, a proposal was submitted to the Bonner Foundation on the initial experience at Rhodes, suggesting that such collaborations be implemented at other colleges with the financial support of the Foundation. Micah 6: Bonner Connection was launched in 2001 and now includes ten college-congregation partnerships across the country that focus on local needs by designing and implementing creative ministries, such as tutoring programs in an under-resourced rural school, transportation services and advocacy for elderly persons, an ESL and community meals program with Spanish-speaking residents, and a youth program in a juvenile detention center.

### How It Works

#### Team Members

Each Micah 6 coordinating team includes at least five members, including: a college staff or faculty member, a Bonner Scholar or Bonner Leader coordinator, a congregational staff or member, or a chaplain, pastor, or spiritual enrichment facilitator. Roles can be shared among team members, but must be specified in each grant proposal.

## Grant Applications

For the past two years, the Bonner Foundation has accepted applications from Bonner schools for the Micah 6: Bonner Connection. These applications outline the constituencies served by the project, the individuals involved, the justice issues addressed by the project, the action plan of the team, and a budget. The Bonner Foundation has made grants of up to \$5,000 per year per project.

## Rhodes Micah 6 Projects

At Rhodes, the current Micah 6: Bonner Connection coordinating team supports several projects, including:

- An urban scouting program for young girls.
- A nonviolence education program for displaced children in one of the most impoverished areas of Memphis.
- A multi-location tutoring program.
- A student and community center for servant leadership.

Using the servant leadership model, groups meet in a small, class-like setting to explore related aspects of faith, service, and social justice. Class topics at Rhodes have included poverty and compassion in Memphis, prayer in a life of service, listening for the voice of vocation, and the challenge and grace of community. The classes include Micah 6 volunteers and other students who are engaged in community service. They meet weekly for six to eight weeks a semester and are committed to regular prayer/meditation, active service and relationship-building with those on the margins of society, spiritual reading, and written reflections. Class time centers primarily on sharing written reflections and supporting the faith exploration of each member.

## Servant Leadership

An important part of the Micah 6 college programs is the annual nationwide gathering for training and reflection. Two representatives attend from each college and congregational partnership. In 2001, the gathering was in Washington, D.C., at the School of Servant Leadership. Micah 6 partnerships from all around the country learned more about each other's projects and explored the concept of servant leadership as one model of how teams might meet the spiritual reflection component of the projects. In 2002, the group met in Atlanta to learn more about the biblical teaching of the prophet Micah and to share project accomplishments and challenges.

The Crestmere Servant Leader House serves as the Rhodes center for servant leadership. The house is owned by First Baptist Church of Greater Memphis, Rhodes's primary Micah 6 partnering congregation. The church provides space for the tutoring program. The summer residents are part of Servant Leader Summer, an intensive urban ministry internship program. The house also serves as the site for all servant leader courses and for meals and other gatherings with students and staff. It is also a center for hospitality for those who are visiting Memphis to engage in, learn about, or teach about service. Finally, the Crestmere House provides a place of respite for some individuals in temporary housing crisis or periods of discernment.

## What Makes The Project Unique

The Micah 6: Bonner Connection program allows college students to collaborate with members of faith communities on all aspects of a service project, from initial assessment of community need, action plan development to the implementation of spiritual reflection and program evaluation.

Groups discover ways to incorporate appropriate reflection for individuals on campus. At Rhodes, students who participate in Micah 6 projects are encouraged to take servant leader classes or to engage in spiritual reflection in other ways. Examples include group and personal Bible studies, journaling, prayer, and spiritual reading.

## Timeline

### Fall

The team should be actively involved in completing an action plan and implementing spiritual reflection components of the project. In mid-fall, the Bonner Foundation sponsors a national gathering

of Micah 6 Bonner partners, attended by representatives of each team.

### Spring

By midyear, the team submits a progress report to the Bonner Foundation and a final report at the end of the school year. Teams should form and begin to identify common areas of concern in the community and develop plans to address these areas of social justice.

## Resources And Partners

Congregational Representatives

The Bonner Foundation

- Provides up to \$5,000 annually in grant money from the Bonner Foundation.

## Overcoming Challenges

Rhodes was the first college to form Micah 6 partnerships with local congregations. One challenge was a lack of colleagues who had created church/college student collaborations. As the program has expanded to other colleges through the Micah 6: Bonner Connection, Rhodes has shared initial experiences with them.

Another early challenge was the difficulty of securing personal involvement from the congregation. Although the churches were very supportive of students in service with church-based projects, some of the early partners did not understand the participatory engagement envisioned for their own members.

One significant factor that helped overcome this challenge was the persistence of student leaders. For example, one of the initial projects was a nonviolence education program for children in a housing project community that was about to be demolished and rebuilt as multi-income level housing. Church staff members initially wanted to give the students independence to develop and run the program, but the students desired the in-person support of older adults who were already in relationship with the children. When the children involved in the program were relocated because of demolition of their neighborhood, the students' constant communication with church members and staff paid off. The church leaders saw an opportunity to sustain the program by distributing flyers to relocated families and by picking the children up in their new neighborhoods to bring them to the church for the weekly program.

The steady growth of Micah 6 college initiatives from the mini-grants at Rhodes to the current grants program with Micah 6 Bonner partners has also helped address the issue of congregational engagement. As the program guidelines were presented to the churches recruited by colleges, church leaders understood the expectations placed on them more clearly at the outset. The annual national gatherings of Micah 6 teams include church leaders, who see first-hand the importance of the church as a fully engaged partner.

Across the board, the Bonner Foundation's increase in financial support and "how-to" resources have motivated the churches to become more involved in the future. The churches will receive additional encouragement to utilize the National Council of Churches' resources for congregational Micah 6 projects, which will likely stimulate more personal and direct involvement in these projects. Coordinating student and congregation members' schedules and maintaining healthy communication is an ongoing challenge.

## Evidence of Success

It has been a goal of Micah 6 projects at Rhodes to offer a visible model on campus of holistic faith and service. In 2001 a graduate assistant helped evaluate the program by interviewing student leaders of Micah 6 teams at Rhodes. Students were asked what motivated them to get involved in Micah 6, what spiritual disciplines were helpful, what sort of impact being a Micah 6 project team leader has had on their lives, and what advice they would offer to others considering starting Micah 6 projects.

The students said that being a part of a Micah 6 team had become an ideal way to combine faith and service with integrity and that it has helped them to address community issues and problems that they were truly passionate about. In 2002, there was outside confirmation of the success of Micah 6 when the national organization Facing History and Ourselves recognized student leaders in the Rhodes Micah 6 project as “local heroes” because of their dedicated work with children in the area of nonviolence.

### **How to Make it Grow**

In a few instances, early Micah 6 projects were adopted by local social service agencies. Active recruitment of volunteers and congregational participants is a key part of sustaining and increasing the partnership’s impact. Team members generally recruit new project leadership as upperclassmen graduate or as congregational representatives need to alter their long-term commitments.

Micah 6 projects might be implemented in secular schools, but would likely operate through a religious group on campus. For example, Micah 6 teams might be formed with students in an Episcopal student union partnering with a local Episcopal church.