

Cultural Connection

Group Gives Immigrants Scholarships To Lutheran Schools

By Shawn Clubb

Gerald Brewah grew up in West Africa and attended mission schools before immigrating to the United States. Many Africans benefited from a Christian education, he said. It's something they miss when they come to America.

"A lot of us living here are Christians," he said. "A lot of us went to mission schools. Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists built 80 percent to 90 percent of the schools. We have families educated in the Christian way." That's why some immigrant families who have their children in the city's public schools are embracing a new program that offers their children scholarships to attend one of three Lutheran schools in South city.

The scholarships are funded through a grant from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to a mission group called Christian Friends of New Americans. Allan Buckman, chairman of the group, said the effort is meant to further the Lutheran ministry in urban St. Louis. He called it a ministry of human care through education. The program will provide as many as 20 three-year scholarships to immigrant students so they can attend Word of Life Lutheran School, 6535 Eichelberger Ave.; King of Glory Lutheran School, 4293 Chippewa St.; or Hope Lutheran School, 5320 Brannon Ave.

Eight scholarships already have been awarded to immigrant students from Afghanistan, Nepal, Liberia and other West African nations. The program pays \$2,500 toward the Lutheran schools' tuition of \$2,900. The individual immigrant families are responsible for a \$300 co-pay and the schools forgive \$100.

Buckman said the program's greatest asset is the work of Brewah and two other facilitators to bridge the gap between the immigrant families and the schools. "Schools have tried this before and they find it comes apart between the schools and the parents because the parents don't speak English," Buckman said.

Brewah, a social worker, is the facilitator for families from West African; the Rev. Adefris Mekasha, pastor at our Redeemer Lutheran Church, is the facilitator for families from East Africa; and Homa Zafer, a graduate student at Washington University, is the facilitator for families from Afghanistan and the Middle East.

The facilitators try to help the families feel connected to the schools, but also try to make them feel connected to the congregation. Many of the families applying to the schools already have started to become members of the Christian Friends of New Americans community through the Peace Educational Center at 4019 S. Grand Blvd.

Brewah said facilitating involves more than just speaking the same language. "We understand the families. We understand the cultural values," he said. "Things will happen and we need to explain what is going on." The facilitators meet the families in their homes, but also come to the schools to attend parent-teacher conferences and otherwise keep the parents involved in their children's learning. "They navigate that educational maze," said Terri Mize, director of development at King of Glory Lutheran School.

King of Glory has gained four new students through the program. They started in November, while a fifth student is started there in January. Some immigrant children already enrolled at the school, including two children of Mekasha. "Part of this was to help diversify the (Lutheran) schools. That was not our problem here," Mize said.

The students seem to have adjusted, Mize said. One third-grader who came from the public schools was at first concerned because the school isn't large. Mize said the boy has now decided he likes the school. She said the school tests the students before deciding whether to accept them to ensure the school can meet their needs.

Mekasha said even immigrants of other faiths are embracing the program, including some Muslim families. While some Muslims are concerned that an education from schools affiliated with Christian faiths would contaminate their religion, Mekasha said that has only deterred families influenced by "ultra-fanatic" Muslim groups.

A second-phase of the program will have Christian Friends of New Americans offering 10 two-year scholarships next year for students to attend Lutheran South High School, 9515 Tesson Ferry Road.