

Church youth groups serve in the Valley

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By Ron Orozco / The Fresno Bee

Over the past couple weeks, church youth groups have done their part to help people in the local community, wielding hammers and paintbrushes at central San Joaquin Valley homes.

In Reedley, 140 youths from La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church in Scottsdale, Ariz., framed 11 homes at a Self-Help Enterprises project off Road 56. Self-Help Enterprises, based in Visalia, is a nonprofit low-income housing organization where families work with neighbors to build their homes together.

In Clovis, another 300 youths from five western states -- volunteers with World Changers missions organization -- renovated 23 homes in a week in low-income neighborhoods. They painted, replaced roofs, repaired fences, cleaned yards -- and provided a little hope to residents. The last nail was pounded Friday.

The Clovis effort marked the sixth straight summer that World Changers, a ministry of the Southern Baptist Convention, sent youths to perform the work. World Changers began in Tennessee in 1990 with 137 volunteers. Now, more than 25,000 youths participate each year. The Clovis Community Development Agency provides the materials for the local work.

Two Valley projects helped -- with lots of love.

Both Reedley and Clovis organizers say the projects are important because they provide opportunities for youths in junior high, high school and college to help others and to grow in their faith.

"Some churches send youths to Mexico, but it's also important for them to do community service in the United States," says Molly Schengel, a representative of Self-Help Enterprises in Visalia. "They realize neighboring states also need that kind of help. It's a chance for them to do a service project and to bond as a youth group."

La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church has worked at Self-Help Enterprises sites four times in the past 13 years. Each time, youths make a commitment beyond the physical work. They also pay the costs of travel, food and lodging.

While the youths worked in Reedley, they cut down on expenses by using Visalia Nazarene Church as home base, sleeping in the church's classrooms.

"Our students pay to go on this trip, to sleep on a floor and to work very hard," says Neil Gatten, director of the Scottsdale church's youth ministries. "It's a testament to the character of who they are."

La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church also sent 40 adults, including the church's senior pastor, the Rev. Andrew Garman. Each day, he slipped back to Visalia Nazarene Church ahead of the youths -- to cook dinner.

"The kids eat like kings and queens," says Schengel, adding that Garman prepared five kinds of pasta at one dinner. "He puts a lot of time and effort to make sure the kids are taken care of."

The youths returned to Scottsdale feeling good. Their efforts put the project about a month ahead of schedule, meaning the 11 families could move in just before Christmas.

"We believe that when kids serve others, they see the joy that can come from giving of themselves," Gatten says.

Officials with the Clovis Community Development Agency say the work performed by church youth groups means a great deal to the community. World Changers has renovated 127 homes in six years.

"It's a chance to partner with all facets of the community to take care of residents, so everyone has a fair shot at decent housing," says Andy Haussler, agency housing program manager.

Clovis resident Carolyn Costa's face lighted up as a dozen World Changers ripped out front-yard ivy at her West Rialto Avenue home, removed 60 fence planks that had fallen, replaced a shed's roof and pressure-washed the home to be painted sage green.

"It's really going to look pretty," says Costa, 70, who is divorced. "They work like a team -- helping, helping, helping."

Shannon Couette, 17, a member of The Cross Church youth group in Yakima, Wash., says she just wants to help others -- and to spread the Gospel message.

"It's a double advantage," she says.

A dozen local churches delivered daily lunches to the crews. At Costa's residence, Woodward Park Baptist Church members brought barbecued chicken, rice pilaf, salad and bread.

The youths returned daily to their home base, Clovis North High School, where they worshipped in the evening before they slept in classrooms.

Lindsay Freund, 16, was one of 20 Clovis Hills Community Church youths also working with World Changers. Lindsay's home wasn't far away, but she still stayed with the others.

"We're on air mattresses," says Lindsay, a senior at Edison High School. "It just makes me feel good knowing I'm helping people out."

Although temperatures swelled to 108 degrees Monday, Terry Maldonado, missions and ministry director at Clovis Hills Community Church, says God was still in control: "I think God is blessing us with a little breeze."