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Church hopes to fill in for Tulare literacy program

Tulare reading program victim of budget cuts

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Written by
Donna-Marie Sonnichsen

People relying on literacy training to pave the way to a better life may no longer need to despair about the loss of Tulare's free literacy program.

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Some members of First Congregational United Church in Tulare are banding together and looking for other supporters in hopes of continuing the work for as many people as possible.

Pastor Stephanie Doss said many other churches are also interested in helping the cause, which means better lives for the people helped, which in turn means a better community for everyone.

"If you can't read, you really cannot move forward. Most people, of any theological perspective, agree teaching reading is a form of social justice. You're reaching out to people who've slipped through the cracks, whether they are new to the country and don't speak the language or have gone through the system and still can't read," Doss said.

The 11-year-old Tulare Read program was a victim of city-wide budget cuts that carved operations to the bone in many areas.

"It wasn't an easy choice, but the reality is we were not given many choices by a bad economy," Mayor Wayne Ross said.

The cuts were necessary because of the state's own belt-tightening, like doing away with 400 redevelopment agencies and other funding sources, which forced many cuts the city didn't want to make, Ross said.

"These were choices made at the state level, where they are not

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holding up their end and are putting [programs] back on cities and counties to fund. It's not a case of whether a program helps or hurts. The question is ultimately what money is available," Ross said.

The program involved between 65 to 75 literacy students at any given [time](#), opening up many life and job opportunities for people, Tulare Public Library Director Michael Stowell said.

The program was so successful, almost half of the library's approximately 100-member volunteer force was dedicated to the program, Adult Services Librarian Mary-Catherine Oxford said.

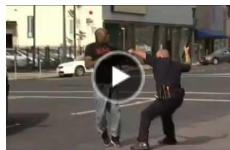
For full-time literacy coordinator Jane Zikratch, who trained hundreds of volunteer tutors, it was heartbreaking to see the program's demise. But she didn't take it personally.

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