Appleton Episcopal Ministries
Annual Report November 2025-October 2026

Mission Statement: *Sharing God's love by partnering with parishes in the Middle Georgia Convocation and the Diocese of Atlanta to promote the health, education, safety and well-being of children and families.*

Appleton Episcopal Ministries coordinates resources, establishes partnerships, and provides financial support for parish-based programs in Macon, Warner Robins, Milledgeville, Eatonton, Perry, Fort Valley and Montezuma and their surrounding counties. Currently, Appleton emphasizes programs addressing literacy and education, food insecurity, mental health, campus ministry, and racial reconciliation.

In November 2025, both Missioner Julie Groce and Program Director Corley Peth attended Annual Diocesan Council hosted at St. Philip's Cathedral in Atlanta. Appleton displayed lots of curriculum books, student crafts, and a colorful, multi-page Annual Report hot off the press. Appleton was able to premier a wonderful new video highlighting Appleton Free To Read™ Summer that featured interviews with students and teachers and offers an inspiring story for everyone. On Thursday evening before Council opened, Appleton hosted its Annual Convocational Dinner at Anis Café in Buckhead to honor Council delegates from parishes in the Middle GA Convocation as well as convocational clergy.

Response to the annual Thanksgiving offering to Appleton was very generous. We are so grateful to both our repeat parishes and to many parishes who have not responded in the past. The staff continues to make visits to parishes around the diocese to present programs on Appleton as the result of this increased interest.

We ended 2025 with generous repeat support from St. Stephen's ECW in Milledgeville to provide Christmas care bags for each of the students who attended our Appleton Free To Read™ Intensive and Summer programs. The decorative bags included pencils, crayons, color books, card games, reading books, Christmas socks, fresh fruit and snacks. Julie and Corley delivered the packages to each school and had happy reunions with many of our children.

In 2026, Appleton received final approval for a trademark for our Free to Read™ literacy programs. Over the ten years that Appleton has delivered summer literacy programming, we have evolved our curriculum to include a structured literacy approach that addresses the critical literacy deficits of our local children. We can now market our Orton Gillingham-based curriculum and lesson plans to other churches and community organizations for summer literacy enrichment and for earned revenue to Appleton. Our program is scalable to address any number of students and can be customized to a collection of books. Organizations can work in partnership with public school systems to identify children for inclusion in a program

or they can offer the program to children they already serve. Appleton will provide training for program delivery and can offer either a list of recommended books for purchase or can directly provide the books needed for all of the students in the program. The impact of Appleton's Free To Read™ program is substantial. Most public school systems are struggling to do the greatest good for the greatest number of students. This means that children with significant literacy deficits most often do not have their needs addressed while, at the same time, they are pushed forward to the next grade level. This is particularly true for schools that serve children growing up in poverty. The deficit of reading skills has been compounded by children's increasing use of digital devices and dependence on social media for entertainment. Appleton's Free To Read™ curriculum is not technology-dependent; in fact, it could be considered "unplugged." It uses evidence-based, structured materials and methods rooted in the Science of Reading that can be delivered in small group settings and reinforced at home around the kitchen table.

In February, Appleton Episcopal Ministries was honored to receive one of the inaugural Dignity Awards from the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing. These awards honor the modern demonstration of The Rev. Absalom Jones's faith, courage and commitment to valuing every human life. Recipients embody this legacy through steady, courageous work – respecting dignity, realigning their lives and work with their faith and the Baptismal Covenant, and restoring justice in the world. Each winner represented a Convocation within the Diocese, offering a witness that dignity is lived locally, relationally, and faithfully.

After successfully piloting our afterschool literacy program titled Appleton Free To Read™ Intensive in early 2025 with 6 second graders at Lewis Elementary School, we accepted twelve 2nd and 3rd graders from Lewis to enroll in a full academic-year program in 2025-2026. Students who participated in this twice-weekly afternoon program were recommended by Lewis EIP teachers and the school principal and all had critical delays in language comprehension and word recognition. This program addresses the improvement of specific and individualized literacy skills based on the Orton-Gillingham multisensory literacy method. Appleton Program Director Corley Peth led the program in a specially-equipped classroom at St. Francis Episcopal Church. The program requires weekly contact with parents about program progress, follow-up activities at home, and individual testing at pre-session, interim, and post-session points in order to ensure both accountability and success.

This year's Appleton Free To Read™ summer program enrolled 36 students from four Bibb County elementary schools. Five of our participants this summer were ESL students. Offered free-of-charge for six weeks and hosted at St. Paul's, our annual program focuses on improving literacy and well-being for rising 1st through 3rd graders. We had three certified teachers on staff, four program assistants, and enrichment teachers in art, science and dance, as well as a reading specialist certified in Orton-Gillingham multisensory literacy practices and a counselor/therapist to address trauma, anxiety and positive mental health. We utilized several translators to communicate regularly with our ESL parents. We also had a speech therapist and an occupational therapist on call for consultations to address specific challenges of individual students. Our program director and our

reading specialist tested all of the students to determine their pre- and post-program reading levels, and 100% of our students saw improvement in both reading and spelling. Many of our students received directed reading assistance during daily pull-outs from the morning's activities with our reading specialist to address specific literacy deficits. Our program also addresses food insecurity, and we provide breakfast, lunch and a nutritious snack each day to all of our students, with hot meals served three times a week. We offered multiple parent dinners to discuss ways to improve communication with teachers during school conferences, to better assist students with homework, and to encourage literacy activities at home. Because chronic absenteeism is a major challenge in Bibb County, we emphasized daily attendance at our program with our parents and guardians. This resulted in 27 of our 36 students receiving a gift card for perfect or near-perfect attendance. Testing results showed a clear relationship between regular attendance and increased improvement in literacy skills in our students.

Each summer since 2018, Appleton has provided its summer staff, board members and community volunteers the opportunity to participate in an annual pilgrimage to Montgomery, Selma, and Lowndes County, Alabama, where we visit Equal Justice sites, civil rights sites, and cultural museums. This past summer, we added a visit to St. John's Episcopal Church, home to many prominent officials in the Confederate government during the Civil War. This experience offers participants the opportunity to study, reflect and reconcile their individual and corporate roles in racism and enslavement that historically involved North, South and international concerns and continue to influence culture, education, and society today.

This July, we sponsored testing and formal diagnosis of dyslexia for one of our Free To Read™ students and advocated with his guardian at his public school so that as of September, he now has both a 504 Plan and an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to meet his needs for special accommodations in his public school; As a result, he will be eligible to attend Roberts Academy of Mercer University, the only dyslexia academy south of Atlanta, next year on a full scholarship.

We are so proud to continue our support of Backpack Buddies in Eatonton in partnership with All Angels Church and Putnam Christian Outreach. This program has expanded to serve more than 250 students every week in primary, elementary, middle school, high school, and the Head Start program. Other Backpack Buddies sponsors include several Eatonton churches, corporations, and the Episcopal Community Foundation. Appleton also gave All Angels funding for Angels for Eagles, a program that provides specific support for 20 Putnam County high schoolers who are considered homeless or home insecure. These students receive gifts of clothing and hygiene products as well as special clothes for graduation ceremonies and job interviews.

We continue to offer our Free To Read ™ Book-in-a-Bag program. Each bag is filled with an age-appropriate book, an associated craft, and art supplies. These packages are designed for children to access books at home without the assistance of a teacher. We offered bilingual books to Hispanic students learning English as a second language. These books are available for distribution in partnership with any

of our convocational parishes and have been shared with food pantries, family shelters, and the Putnam Backpack Buddies program. In 2027, we will expand this program opportunity to parishes across the Diocese.

Again this year, Appleton regularly supported the Milly Free Fridge, which offers fresh-packed food-to-go for students and families in Milledgeville in partnership with St. Stephen's Church. We gave a discretionary grant to All Saints Episcopal Church's Food Pantry in Warner Robins for special food purchases. We also supported Christ Church's efforts to provide fresh sandwiches for the Centenary Methodist Free Fridge, and our summer program students created hygiene packets for Daybreak Resource Center in Macon.

We continue to provide active support for Campus Ministry programs in Macon, Milledgeville, Warner Robins, and Fort Valley. Colleges serves by these ministries include Mercer University, Wesleyan College, Middle Ga State University, Fort Valley State University, Central GA Technical College, and GA State College and University. Funding is used to provide meals, exam survival packages, hygiene items, field trips, and program support. Appleton holds a board position on the Episcopal Lutheran Fellowship (ELF) that oversees ministry activities at the Macon colleges and universities.

Several parishes have used the Appleton van for both local and regional trips. The van services Appleton programs with year-round transportation from schools to program sites at St. Paul's and St. Francis and transport for enrichment activities during the summer program. Additional van use included EYC trips from several parishes, trips to the Cathedral for confirmation and ordination, transport for Episcopal Lutheran Fellowship (ELF) Campus Ministry activities, and trips by the Common Ground ministry of Mercer University to Pride events in Atlanta.

We continued our annual commemoration of the Appleton Deaconesses this year with a special worship service during Clergy Conference in September.

In October, Appleton again served as a sponsor for the annual Beloved Community Symposium at Mercer University. This year's speakers were Josh Clemons and Dan Crain from One Race Movement in Atlanta. This group is a gospel-centered movement that exists to displace historic racism through prayer relationship, equipping, mercy and justice. Attendees included clergy from multiple churches, Mercer students, regional residents, and representatives from community organizations. Appleton's Canon Missioner Julie Groce is a member of the Beloved Community's Steering Community.

We have been very blessed to receive significant support for Appleton programs this year from the Moulton Family and the How Can We Serve Foundation, The Community Foundation of the Central GA's Non-Profit Grant Program, The Community Foundation of Central GA's Macon Violence Prevention Fund, Within Reach Educational Consultants, The Powers Family Foundation, The Society of St. Anna the Prophet, The Jackson Family Foundation, Georgia Power, St. Paul's Outreach Committee, Christ Church Community Services Fund, Parishes of the

Convocation of Middle GA, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer ELCA, Lizzy Chapel Baptist Church, Parishes of the Diocese of Atlanta, Daughters of the King Chapters across Middle GA, and numerous individual donors. In addition, St. Paul's Episcopal Church provides free, year-round space for our Appleton offices and program space for our Free To Read™ summer literacy program. St. Francis Episcopal Church provides free program space for our academic-year Free To Read™ Intensive program. Every donation makes a difference in what we can offer to others in our ministry.

Appleton is blessed with many opportunities to change lives for the better. We spend much of our time building relationships with children, families and young adults through ongoing contact; participating in community programs and events; making visits to public schools, college campuses, and food pantries, and presenting programs to educators at partner schools.

This year, we face the challenge of replacing our Program Director, who resigned at the end of July to return to classroom teaching full time at an Episcopal school in Virginia. Finding a new person with vision and dedication will take time and effort. We are working to improve our marketing and communication efforts with a new website, and we will examine and develop stronger fundraising methods for continued growth and success of this integral Diocesan ministry. We are deeply grateful for the opportunity to serve.

Respectfully submitted by Canon Missioner Julie Groce

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