



grand rapids  
**metro ministry**  
of the united methodist church

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### **Grand Rapids Metro Ministry Relaunches Local Child Literacy Program**

Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Metro Ministry, a nonprofit affiliated with the United Methodist Church, announces the relaunch of Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), a literacy program targeted to at-risk children in the greater Grand Rapids area.

Early literacy is a key focus of Michigan schools, especially following a new law that, beginning with the 2019-20 school, will require students who are at least one grade level behind in reading at the end of third grade to be held back. Other than parent education, the presence of books in the home is the largest indicator of child literacy. The RIF program distributes books to students in Grand Rapids area schools twice each school year. These books are chosen by the student and are theirs to take home.

Holly Downer, Executive Director of Grand Rapids Metro Ministry and parent of two Grand Rapids Public School (GRPS) students, witnessed firsthand the impact and excitement of a child getting their first book at her daughter's school in 2015. A first grader exclaimed, "I've never had my own book. I can really keep this? Can I take it home to show my mom?" Downer shares, "This experience was both heartwarming and heartbreaking. It underscored the value of the RIF program and served as a catalyst for Grand Rapids Metro Ministry to relaunch RIF when we learned that GRPS was no longer able to support the program."

Until June 2017, RIF was a program with Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS). The program was eliminated in the budget for the 2017-18 school year (see article here:

[http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2017/06/rif\\_program\\_to\\_be\\_discontinued.html](http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2017/06/rif_program_to_be_discontinued.html) )



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Grand Rapids Metro Ministry's mission is to:

- educate the Grand Rapids Community on local issues around poverty, justice, and mercy,
- build community collaborations around issues of poverty and injustice, and
- launch and fund programs that address the root causes of poverty and injustice.

As literacy and educational attainment are strong indicators of poverty, Grand Rapids Metro Ministry is dedicated to supporting RIF as a proactive means to address these issues in our community.

In keeping with their goal to build community collaborations, Grand Rapids Metro Ministry is developing partnerships between local schools and United Methodist churches, organizations, and other congregations. This allows them to not only provide book distributions through RIF but also to bring much needed community support into our local schools. These vital partnerships will begin with the distribution of books through RIF's Books For Ownership program, with plans to expand these relationships to include in-school support for tutoring and mentorship.

Grand Rapids Metro Ministry has brought two dynamic Program Managers onto their team to help in accomplishing these goals. Becca Walsh-Wolfe, former RIF Coordinator with GRPS, not only brings expertise of the RIF program and literacy issues, but also a strong passion for our public schools. Sara Binkley-Tow, co-founder and former Executive Director of MomsBloom, brings expertise in program management, development, and the skill set needed to allow the program to expand and thrive.

For the 2017-18 school year, Grand Rapids Metro Ministry has targeted 10 schools in GRPS for book distribution. Having already received requests from additional schools in GRPS and other local districts, plans are being made to expand their reach significantly in coming years.

In order to make this expansion possible, Grand Rapids Metro Ministry is seeking additional community partners for both in-school work and funding. If you or your organization are interested in being a part of this impactful program, please contact Holly Downer at [Holly@GRMetroMinistry.org](mailto:Holly@GRMetroMinistry.org)

Learn more about Grand Rapids Metro Ministry at [www.GRMetroMinistry.org](http://www.GRMetroMinistry.org)

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