

# Living the Mission of the Church:

## Bringing it to Life Through Camp Partnerships

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I remember the point when the direction for our camp became crystal clear. It came during our Confirmation Camp. The format of those camps called for six brief talks from Teaching Elders or Christian Educators on topics such as "What it Means to be a Christian," "Why Become a Local Church Member." The youth went into small groups after each talk and started creating their own church, step by step. They wrote the mission statement (try doing that in 20 minutes with your Session!), developed their order of worship, came up with a budget, and more. They named their church (there weren't any First Presbyterians!) and finally they drew the floor plans for the building (assuming they would have one). Each group presented their church to the whole group.

I kept the drawings over the years. What amazed and inspired me was that virtually all their buildings had mission not only in the budget, but *in the building*. A food pantry....clothes closets....blood donation clinic....English as a Second Language classroom.....day care for low income families....soup kitchen, to name some. Wow! It made me think: "Why should a camp be any different?" We *all* know that churches need to be engaged in mission to be healthy. Why should a faith-based camp get an exemption for this spiritual principle? Answer: It shouldn't.

From that point we were committed to becoming a missional camp.

We started by offering our resources....land and volunteers....to help with disaster response. We knocked on the doors of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Church World Service. "If we built a Disaster Assistance Center, would you use it?" They said "yes." It soon became an even louder "YES!" when Katrina hit our next door neighbors along the gulf coast. Presbyterian Women awarded us a \$200,000 Birthday Offering and we had a year round important ministry for our volunteers and campers to connect with people in need.

We continued down the path as our Synod of the Sun looked for a location to conduct Solar School. This program, Solar Under the Sun, trains people so they can install a small scale solar energy system in partnership with a low income communities around the world, such as in Haiti. We received funding and built the largest straw bale-walled, solar powered building in the country. The Eco Center serves as a classroom, worship center, and housing for Solar School students. In 2015 Ferncliff will host class #13 and #14. More than 150 graduates have now installed over 50 systems in Haiti that are providing clean water to communities.

Like many camps, we looked for outreach camps to conduct in partnership with other groups. We have been blessed to host camps for children in foster care, children who lost a family member to suicide, children of homeless parents, children of parents in prison, evacuees, and children whose lives were disrupted by tornadoes. These were in addition to all the traditional camps for our Presbyterian youth and neighbors.

Collaboration seems to beget more collaboration. This past year, with Second Presbyterian Church (Little Rock), PDA and Ferncliff partnered to start the Little Rock YAV (Young Adult Volunteer) program. Each year 3-5 young adults now spend a year at camp engaged in mission, Christian community, vocational discernment and sustainable living. It took three years of planning and persistence, but it is now positively impacting many lives.

The youth had it right. Mission needs to be “in the building.” For us it also needs to be “in the camp.” The Confirmation Campers told us. Our experience has sold us. Camps, like churches, are called to be missional and collaborative.