

Vacation Bible school: No lions, tigers and bears, but horses, games, snacks - and Scripture

The concept of Vacation Bible School encompasses many approaches and activities. The Catholic Review checked in to see what has happening on that front at three parishes in early July.

Cherry Hill

St. Veronica Parish staged its free Summer Academy for the 27th year, enriching 43 children from the community from July 1 to August 2 with activities that include instruction in math, reading and science that reinforces lesson learned during the school year, as well as activities that range from arts and crafts, to cooking and games, and conflict resolution.

“This is one of the activities I look forward to every year,” said Father Stephen Ostimehin, in his fifth year at St. Veronica, which was founded in 1945 to serve the black community. “Our primary intention is to plant in them a seed of peace. (the) seed of Christ, he’s the prince of peace.

“One thing I’ve learned about the community is a lot (of residents) have anger issues steaming from their experience. We try to encourage them (the children) to take charge of themselves, don’t let anyone else control you, get you mad or angry.”

Those lessons are reinforced, he said, “through stories in the Scripture (that teach) everyone is their brother or sister. ... We lift them up in school as well. It’s not just the spiritual support, but the physical, the psychological.”

The academy is directed by Cathy McClain, the parish secretary who has worn many hats there. When the academy’s 27th year was in danger of being canceled due to a lack of funding, she put out a plea for help. It was answered by, among others, the League of the Little Flower and the mayor’s office.

Hydes

Nearly 40 children spent the mornings of July 8-12 on the campus of St. John the Evangelist, Long Green Valley, for a week dedicated to the “Roar” theme.

“Roar ... like the strength of a Lion, God is our strength, our stronghold,” said Theresa Konitzer, director of religious education in the northeast Baltimore County, not far from its border with Harford County. “I always think of that image of a lion, a mighty, majestic animal...that’s what our theme talks about. God is always strong, He’s always there. When life creates changes or life is unfair, God is good.”

While the king of the jungle didn’t pay children a visit, their week included hands-on experiences with therapy horses and dogs.

“Not only is it a way to break up the week,” Konitzer said, “they are learning how to take care of them, like brushing and feeding. It’s important to learn how to take care of God’s creation. We’ve been talking about animals in Africa like the Rhinoceros, and poachers who kill them for their horns.

“They (kids) also learn they are just more than horses or dogs (pets), they are actually helping other people heal and become whole. It could be a physical or mental challenge people have.”

The animals were brought by Wellspring of Life Farms in Monkton,

Its staff includes Dawn Leung, a parishioner of St. John, Long Green Valley, who serves there, along with her husband, in Children’s Liturgy of the Word (CLOW).

“It’s wonderful,” she said, of the children spending time with animals. “I wish we could spend more time in nature.”

Linthicum Heights

St. Philip Neri Parish followed the lead of a parish in Southern Maryland when it embarked on an ambitious nine-week summer camp that has 13 young adult “camp ministers” on staff and 15 early-teen volunteers supervising a total of 116 children who have signed up for all, or portions of the camp.

“It’s an intentional approach to form young adults through intense evangelization,” Father Michael DeAscanis, pastor. “We are realizing that they (young adults) are in Catholic settings but not really in formation. Here they get a paid summer job, which (includes) daily Mass, adoration and faith discussions.

“We had 35 young adults apply for 13 positions. I wish I could have hired them all. It was beautiful experience, going through their resumes reading about their faith and how they serve the community.”

Their commitment includes “before” and “after” care that extends the day from 6:45 a.m. to 6 p.m. Campers range in age from 4 to 12. Most are from families who worship at St. Philip Neri. According to Timothy M. Feeney, evangelization director for the parish and director of the camp, staff have applied camp themes ranging from sports to Disney, “Weird Science,” Dance and Theater.

“There’s a vocational aspect to it about keeping a job, running a business in a certain sense,” Feeney said of the high-schoolers and college-aged students charting its course. “The other aspect is evangelization.

“It gives them a taste of consistently practicing the faith. The idea is that as the summer goes, their faith will grow. By the end of the summer you have these young adults who’ve experienced what it means to be Catholic, to love Christ, to experience him in the Eucharist.

“We want it to be a fun summer experience in a Catholic environment.”

Paul McMullen contributed to this article.

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