

KIDS CAN LEAD THE WAY

A Might Missions VBS by Sadie Wohlfahrt

Our congregation is tasked with transforming ourselves into a mission station church; a spiritual heart for those who feel far from home and/or far from God. In all of our daily work, we are to focus our eyes through that lens; to channel our efforts into that lane. This vision gives us direction and purpose.

How does this impact our children's ministries? At the very least, we must expect our children to maintain the same focus in their work. At best, we can help them lead the way. We made the scary decision earlier this year, to chuck everything we knew about VBS and head down the "road less travelled." We decided to put on our mission hats! For many years, and in many congregations, vacation bible school has been all about "fun." It is advertised as such, and sold to families as such. I like fun as much as the next person, but is that the purpose of the church? Do we exist, to make ourselves feel good? Of course, as adults, we can assuredly answer, no! We exist to reach out to others, to share the good news, and to be Christ to those who are *not yet inside our doors!*

But are we communicating that to our children? Are we really that surprised when they turn 18, and become disillusioned with a church that no longer entertains them, and now expects them to work?

Can we instead engage children in mission, work hard alongside them reaching out to those in need, and *still have fun?* We sought to answer these questions this year at Mighty Missions Vacation Bible School.

With the help of over 35 adults and 18 teenagers, we hosted **124 children**, 75% of whom do not regularly attend our church- including six families registered as "unchurched" or having "no home church." (This is the number we are most interested in increasing- as part of our work to be the spiritual heart of Bentonville!)

For our mission work, children assembled 108 dog toys and 113 cat toys for local animal shelters, as well as 43 bird feeders for our "wilder" friends around town. They also packaged 18 *Birthday In A Box* kits for children whose families cannot afford a birthday party, and 30 backpacks for kids in the NWA Women's Shelter, who may not otherwise have school supplies this August.

On Wednesday, we partnered with the talented Eileen Guillory of Painting with Mrs. Guillory, to design 76 beautiful works of art for local nursing homes and senior living centers. Thanks to the generosity of two of our church families, we hosted our third annual *Pack Shack* party, to package 9,504 nutritious meals for those in our area facing food insecurity. At the end of each morning, our pastors shared communion with all those gathered- children, parents, and volunteers. In this way, we are one step closer to a truly Methodist vacation bible school, which is a rare and unique concept. Each morning, we partook of the bread and cup, to remember our purpose, and our calling.

In these five days we made, and packaged, and assembled, and created, and organized, and decorated, and baked, and prayed over a lot of STUFF! But what did we *really* do? I believe we really helped 124 kids know what "mission" means; what it feels like to be empowered by God's love, and propelled by scripture, to do good work. We taught kids to get inside the head and heart of a child who does not have money for a birthday party, or a lonely senior who does not get visited at the nursing home, or a dog who has not been adopted, or a family who goes home to an empty fridge at night. What we really did, was get *outside ourselves*. Our children took nothing home this week. (I'm so sorry, parents, for the sad lack of paper plate/crepe streamer/glittery gem projects on the floor of your minivan! Truly. I know it's a deep loss.)

Children are concrete thinkers, and money is abstract. Thanks to your generous giving, we could take the money piece out of that equation, and the children were left with the *stuff*; real, hands-on, messy, big, wonderful projects! When children actually touch something that another person will use- whether that is a birthday cake mix, or a meal, or a backpack full of supplies- they make a connection. They learn that we are called to reach out, and love our neighbors as ourselves. And that love needs to be put into action. Jesus loved and trusted children. Thank you for being a church that does the same!

