

For the past 2 years, we have done what we call our Local Mission Trip for those in 6th grade and younger in place of a more traditional VBS. The kids love it and they get the message that we are helping others here at home.

In place of a more traditional VBS, we created a Local Mission Trip for our children 6th grade and younger. While they are not ready for an overnight service experience, this week prepares them for those future trip, and valuable right now.

The kids love it and they get the message that we are helping others here at home. Using a parable or parts of the Sermon on the Mount to frame the day's activity, we have sorted food at our local food pantry, picked up trash on the greenway, worked weeding the community garden, and visited a nursing home where everyone played games and sang songs with our organist.

The Seed of an Idea

After four years of creating a cycle of Vacation Bible Schools that reflected our Sunday Godly Play experience, my senior warden came to me with an idea. Her oldest was in 5th grade and she didn't feel he was ready to go off as a rising 6th grader for a youth mission trip away from home. She suggested we do a different kind of Bible School centered on a Local Mission Trip for those in 3rd through 6th grade here in our town. We called it The Summer of Service and we planned it for those in 3rd and above.

Year One

The first year it was a way to include our elementary children in a "mission trip" and help them begin to see what happens on the trips our youth took. We limited that first year to 3rd grade through 6th grade with several middle and high schoolers who worked with us as part of their community service. The first year we did not include any younger children. Basing our week together on the Good Samaritan, we met Monday through Thursday from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. After a gathering with the day's scripture and a "wondering session", we spent each morning at a local service project. We returned to the church for a time to "debrief and wonder" and for lunch, supplied by members of the parish. Everyone then participated in a planned afternoon "fun" activity with pick up there at 3:00 pm.

The first year our 24 young people and adults:

- went to the local cooperative ministry food pantry on Monday and Tuesday and sorted a huge pile of donated foods from the May Postal Food Drive that the pantry people hadn't gotten around to being able to sort. We had about 24 young people and several adults. We gathered at the church at 9:00 am and were at the pantry from 9:30 to 11:30.
- On Wednesday (a very hot southern day) we weeded in the Rotary's Community Garden which is down the street from our uptown church.
- Thursday we worked with the young people who attend a summer camp program for children with serious disabilities that meets in our parish each summer. The kids played games and did crafts with the children during their activity time and helped with an art project.
- In the afternoons we bowled, went swimming at a local swim club, and watched a movie at the church the afternoon after working in the garden in the heat, and again with the Kamp kids on Thursday.

Year Two

The second year, we added a component for the 4 year-old through 2nd graders. They stayed at the church with a more traditional VBS format. We found this youngest group in our parish missed out on vacation Bible learning so we read them the parable for the day and they did something each day to support what was being done by the big kids off-site. Our group was very young and loved to color and do word searches and maze type sheets. They played outside and sang with our organist.







That second year our focus was a variety of parables and we again did two days at the food pantry (they had the same pile of food from the food drive!), picked up trash on our local Greenway, and visited a nursing home where a group played bingo, a group sang songs, and a group cleaned out and organized a closet.

The younger group at the church bagged 9-bean dry soup mix to go to the food pantry on Monday and decorated placemats for the nursing home on Tuesday. We picked up the trash in the block around our parish while the others were on the greenway and were part of the singers at the nursing home on Thursday. After lunch most of the younger children went home, unless they had a parent or older sibling who went to the activity. We included roller skating and putt-putt with the bowling and swimming this second year.

Year Three

- Local Mission Week and Vacation Bible School, 3rd year - Made in the Image of God
- Service projects that help children, our city & the parish.
- God's Creation, packed 1000 dental kits for upcoming Backpack Weekend Food Program...Roller Skating
- "Do Unto Others" - Golden Rule in all religions. Youngers looked at 10 Commandments and wondered about an 11th; Older group made 50 Cloud Windows for the Keep Gaston Beautiful program, to be used in schools this fall....bowling
- "Do for the least of these" 75 cards that the Deacon will use to keep connected those who are unable to join us for worship...laser tag
- For our parish community in preparation for Homecoming Sunday - even helped prepare our lunchtime feast — pool party

Our Local Missions Trips have been very successful. It has been easy to find local groups that will let a our young people—with adult supervision come—serve for a couple of hours. Older teenagers looking for community service and parents to help drive and supervise are important.

Polly Redd is the Director of Christian Formation and Communication at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Gastonia, NC. She has been active in formation in the Dioceses of Western North Carolina and North Carolina and is a former Board member of Forma: The Network for Christian Formation.