



David Gill

The Birthday Offering at Work in a Presbyterian Camp

BY DAVID GILL

What kind of ministry of compassion could be located at a camp, touch children’s hearts and engage their hands?

That’s the question that began to weigh on me after seeing the new “churches” created by participants at our Junior High Confirmation Camps. The answer to that question led to the first Birthday Offering ever awarded a Presbyterian camp.

Ferncliff, like many camps, hosts Confirmation Camp—a weekend during which confirmands from area churches come together and apply what they have learned in their confirmation classes. Working in small groups, they use the weekend to create a new church from scratch. They each are challenged to write a personal faith statement and after sharing those, they write a mission statement for their new church—in 20 minutes!

During the course of the fast-paced weekend, they review the basics of Reformed worship and create their order of service. Each group names its church, creates an annual budget, sets mission priorities and develops an organizational chart.

Keeping in mind that “form follows function,” the last thing participants do is draw the floor plan for their

building. As the weekend concludes, each small group presents its church to the large group, responds to questions and receives feedback.

I have collated the results from five years of these Confirmation Camps. Some of their work might be considered predictable, but there were significant surprises as well. Not one group used the name “First Presbyterian Church.” Instead, they have opted for names like “Spirit of Faith Presbyterian,” or “Living Waters Presbyterian,” or “New Hope Presbyterian.” Some have been quite creative, such as the “International House of God Presbyterian”—abbreviated IHOG (in honor of the Arkansas Razorbacks!) and located right next to an IHOP. Another decided to be “FUN Presbyterian Church” (an abbreviation for Fellowship, United and Noticeable!). And for this text messaging generation there was “Live Out Loud Presbyterian” (LOL).

More Than Bricks and Mortar

All the church buildings are of course youth-friendly, with features such as showers in the bathrooms (these kids do lock-ins!) and large youth rooms. One group had a youth loft in the sanctuary, with couches instead of pews.

Another had the youth room on the second floor and a fire pole to slide down. Many had gyms, stages, computer labs and multimedia centers. Some of the organizational charts were shaped like a wheel rather than as a pyramid. One group even wrote job descriptions. For example, the church secretary is to “answer the phone, take notes, have good moral character and be able to spell.”

But what is really significant is that year after year, most of the church buildings had some form of outreach in their building. It wasn't enough to give a portion of their budget to help people somewhere else. Camp participants want to see compassion for others happening under their church roofs. There were soup kitchens, food pantries and thrift stores. One group put in an ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom. Another had a clothes closet specifically for teens. One had a place set aside for the Red Cross to set up for blood donations, while others had day-care centers for low-income families. Granted, a 20-minute review session on the importance of being a mission-minded church was one of the participants' plenary sessions, but none of us expected them to consistently incorporate mission into their floor plans and into the daily life of the churches.

But there it was. Which prompted the camp's staff to think, “If these children want to be connected to tangible outreach ministry in their congregations, what might a camp like Ferncliff do to have tangible outreach in our camp? Not just one-time service projects, but something substantial, year-round, that could involve the youth. If we want a well-rounded faith, shouldn't outreach be part of a well-rounded camp experience?”

We could quickly come up with things that wouldn't work. It's not practical to have a soup kitchen or homeless shelter or free medical clinic at a rural camp. Then we recalled an event that our presbytery's mission committee did several years earlier with our Youth-at-Presbytery gathering. The committee organized the youth who worked from 11 P.M. to 2 A.M. making 2,000 Gift of the Heart health kits for Church World Service (CWS). There was a lot of enthusiasm and hands-on involvement. The finished kits had to be shipped all the way to Maryland as the New Windsor Service Center there was the only CWS warehouse. The postage was significant and we realized those kits might have come back to this part of the country for a flood, hurricane or tornado.

So we had an idea. At a camp, we have two key resources: acreage and volunteers. What if Ferncliff built a warehouse so that churches in this part of the country and campers could help with the work of opening, sorting, weighing and preparing for re-shipment? Perhaps, if postage were not so prohibitive, more churches would make kits.

More Than a Camp

We sent this idea to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) and on the very day our email arrived, a CWS representative happened to be in Louisville for meetings. Both

PDA and CWS saw possibilities in our proposal. They looked at a map and realized that Arkansas is a day's drive from hurricane-vulnerable coastal areas, Tornado Alley and delta flooding. The discussion turned into visits and the visits to draft agreements.

In spring 2004 we decided to apply for a Birthday Offering grant, even though there are many applicants and only four or five are selected each year. We also knew it would be nine months before the selections were made and another 18 months before those projects were funded. We applied anyway and went on with our work.

On December 18, 2004, an envelope arrived from Presbyterian Women. All the other camp staff members were on Christmas break. I opened the letter and let out a yell that our junior high confirmands would have been proud of—albeit to an empty office! The Ferncliff Disaster Response Center was to be one of four recipients of the 2005 Birthday Offering. A \$200,000 grant would bring an answer to the question, “What kind of ministry can be located at a camp?” It would be another 18 months before the funds would be in hand.

We finished camp the summer of 2005, and my wife, Vicki, and I had just headed out the door for a long-awaited sabbatical—our first after 30 years in ministry. Two weeks into our three-month sabbatical, Hurricane

The Birthday Offering of Presbyterian Women

The Creative Ministries Offering Committee of Presbyterian Women reviews proposals and selects recipients before the Birthday Offering is collected. The grant amounts for the recipients listed in this issue (see pages 26–27) will depend on the funds contributed during 2007. The goal for this year's offering is \$1.2 million.

To learn more about the Birthday Offering of Presbyterian Women, contact Cindy Goodman, 888/728-7228, ext. 5387, cgoodman@ctr.pcusa.org, or visit www.pcusa.org/pw.



Laura Lee



David Gill



Laura Lee

Top left: an example of the disaster relief kits that are assembled at Ferncliff by participants of the Family Camp (bottom left). The groundbreaking of the new Ferncliff Disaster Relief building: (left to right) Kathryn Baker, former PW vice moderator for mission relationships; Karen Akin, associate pastor at Second Presbyterian and president of Ferncliff Board; Russ Jackson, PDA coordinator at Ferncliff office; Bill Branch, General Presbyter; and David Gill, Ferncliff director.

Katrina struck. The next day, I got a call from my friend, Susan Ryan, who also serves as the coordinator for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). “You know that warehouse you plan to build? Do you think you could build it more quickly? We’re running out of room in Houston. Can we start having churches send kits to Ferncliff now?” At the same time, we got calls about housing evacuees. The sabbatical could wait.

Presbyterian Women (PW) expedited the \$200,000, and PDA added another \$85,000. The national leadership of PW decided to meet at Ferncliff that fall, so they helped us break ground six months earlier than originally planned. The building was completed in June 2006 and immediately put to use. For Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, it is now the facility that holds supplies for volunteer villages along the Gulf coast. For Church World Service, it

is their first regional depot where Gift of the Heart kits from any church can be sent, processed and collected for shipment to Maryland or directly to a mission partner. And for Ferncliff, it is a place where campers can be directly involved in the mission of the larger church.

While some would say that children are to be seen and not heard, Jesus told us they should be seen and heard and embraced. Kids don’t care that the church’s carpet might get soiled, the van might get dinged or the utility bills might get a bit higher when we do ministry “under our roofs.” Who would have thought that a 10,000-square-foot Disaster Assistance Center (“the DAC” as the campers call it) would be a perfect fit at a camp? Not me.

I don’t know that Jesus ever roasted marshmallows with the disciples, but I’m quite sure that his campfire conversations got around to talking about God’s love and care

for each of us and ours in turn for others. I want our conversations at camp to be at that level as well. Now, each of our campers takes a hayride over to “the DAC,” where they can help make a kit that will help a needy family. This grant from the Birthday Offering of Presbyterian Women has created both a place and sense of purpose, making camp a place where both fun and faith can flourish.

As it takes more than bricks and mortar to make today’s church, it takes more than a campfire and marshmallows to make today’s camp. Thank you, Presbyterian Women. Our junior high confirmands roast a marshmallow in your honor. 🍡

David Gill is the program director at Ferncliff Presbyterian Camp and proud to be “the only honorary Presbyterian woman” in Arkansas Presbytery.