Church Together

PRINCE OF PEACE, SARATOGA: GOD’S WORK, OUR HANDS... AND IMAGINATION!

Like many of our ELCA congregations, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Saratoga has a long history serving people who are homeless or housing insecure. But those experiences of hands-on serving in rather typical ways, combined with some Spirit-inspired imagination, have led Prince of Peace into some less typical, more unique kinds of service.

When the first San Jose Family Shelter was built in the 1980s, Prince of Peace and other area congregations and non-profits each sponsored a room, providing furniture and other household supplies. The Shelter serves up to 35 single- or two-parent families at a time. The families are not chronically homeless but, after a job loss or health setback, need this 90 day gift of support while they get back on their feet. The Shelter is proud of its 85% success rate.

Over the years Prince of Peace remained involved with the Shelter’s work, and the relationship matured. About 16 years ago the imagination kicked in and a new kind of service was born. Partnering with Mt. Cross Ministries, Thrivent Financial (who for many years added a 50 cent gift to every dollar the congregation raised), and the Shelter, Prince of Peace developed the Kids to Camp ministry that over the years has provided hundreds of Shelter children, elementary through middle school, with a week long overnight camp at Mt. Cross. At its inception in 2002 Kids to Camp raised $2,500 and sent 13 children to Mt. Cross. In 2017 their goal was to provide 35 children with a week at camp. But the congregation’s generosity exceeded expectations. $13,203 was given by 54 generous givers/families (40% of the membership), and 46 children received the gift of a week at Mt. Cross! Lu Walthart, the first organizer of Kids to Camp, was at that time also a member of Prince of Peace’s WELCA board; in her honor that board sponsors one child each year. Cathy Schroeder, Kids to Camp Coordinator for 10 years, says, “Our congregation supports Kids to Camp with overwhelming enthusiasm and generosity! Every year I am overwhelmed by this support.” Each year on an April Sunday a major event kicks off the fundraising effort; by that Sunday last year the minimum goal had already been reached! 2017 gifts ranged from $5 to sponsoring 10 children, with all 54 gifts gladly given according to means. Mt. Cross partners with camper discounts, and Prince of Peace provides the
rest. In addition to a cost-free week at camp, each child receives a sleeping bag, a back pack, camp clothing, a swimsuit and beach towel, sunscreen, other supplies, and some cash for snacks at the camp’s Trading Post. Why does Prince of Peace do this? So these children, at a difficult time in their lives, will experience God’s love in Christian community, be immersed in nature, and be briefly removed from the family stress so they “can just be kids.” After leaving the Shelter one mother sent a letter to Prince of Peace: “My child had a wonderful experience at Mt. Cross last summer. Do you have funds to help my two sons go to camp this summer?”

Similarly, for many years Prince of Peace was a partner in a rotating men’s shelter, with homeless men sheltered at the church for one month each year. Guests were required to be looking for work, and were supported in that effort. It is common for Lutheran congregations to be involved in such caring programs. When that program closed, Prince of Peace members exclaimed, “Well, we’ve gotta do something!” Again, the time was ripe for imagination. Pastor Sara Pearson reports that members researched a Safe Park program in Seattle, worked with government leaders and four other congregations, and Prince of Peace became the driving force behind an experimental (2019 was the first year) Safe Park program. Housing insecure families and individuals, living in their vehicles, after being screened by a third party social service organization, are invited to park overnight in five church parking lots on a rotating basis. Church volunteers, trained by the Sheriff’s department, check guests in, provide access to kitchen and bathrooms, and in the morning provide coffee and breakfast foods. The local police cooperate by occasional overnight visits to make sure the parking lot is safe. While the maximum number of vehicles allowed is 15, there are never fewer than 10 each night.

Kids to Camp. Safe Park. Unusual ministries, unique kinds of service. God’s work, our hands…and imagination!

By Carl Wilfrid

NOTE! For a deeper, updated look into Saratoga’s Safe Park program and Prince of Peace’s involvement, read “Room in the parking lot” by Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil, in the Jan. 15, 2020 issue of Christian Century.

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.