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From the Clergy Assistant

Youth Mission Trip and Outreach

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me...." (Matthew 25:35)

Often we think of "Outreach" and "Mission Trip" as *our* act of going out and serving others and "striving for justice and peace among all people". And it is. But it is also much more than that. It is the act of others welcoming us into their world, their holy work. This past July six of our youth and myself served at City Camp in a densely populated, predominantly Black, low income neighborhood in North Philadelphia for a week. A group from St. Peter's – Essex Fells also joined us for the week. The camp is on the grounds of St. James the Less, an old Episcopal church, with a small former Episcopal grade school and rectory. The grounds are beautiful with gorgeous, huge old trees, a picturesque graveyard around the lovely little church, and lots of green grass. These grounds are truly an oasis in the midst of a concrete and cement desert.

On our second day of the mission trip, a Sunday, our groups walked with the City Camp staff to the worship service of the community's United Methodist church. The City Camp leadership asked that as we walked through the neighborhood, to note any differences that we saw between our neighborhoods back home and this neighborhood. And there were certainly a number of differences: very few trees and very little grass, if any; sidewalks in total disrepair; schools with "chain fencing" over the windows – just to name a few. In spite of these external differences, however, as we walked along the sidewalks, neighbors warmly greeted us. And as we entered Devereux Memorial UMC, we were very warmly welcomed to a fabulous worship service and hospitality hour. *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me...."* (Matthew 25:35)

On Monday, camp began. Most of our participants helped with the day camp (Monday – Friday, 8:30am – 5:00pm) for the neighborhood children, aged 5 - 10. Our youth served as assistants to counselors and leaders of arts and crafts, field sports, and ceramics; and some did more physical work projects around the grounds helping to prepare it to serve in the fall as a small middle school, St. James School—similar to St. Philip's Academy in Newark when that began.

This was not a “typical” mission trip that we were used to—or expecting. Working with the children stretched and challenged all of us mentally and emotionally rather than the more physical challenge of building or repairing houses or other such projects. Andrew, the director of the program, explained that many of the campers who come from the neighborhood have various behavioral issues; many campers come from very difficult home situations—and can be very needy emotionally or very difficult to keep engaged in activities or to keep from acting out. So our youth were kept on their toes and had some tough challenges, and yet, they got to know these campers, these children from the area; our youth were able to put a face on some of the “statistics” of the community.

The campers welcomed us into their world—even if we only were able to catch a very small glimpse of their world; a world in which only 50% of high school students graduate on time; more than 40% drop out all together and only 10% get a college degree (School Dept. of Philadelphia 2010-2011 budget). One of the youth from St. Peter’s mission trip group said it broke his heart to hear the campers talk about what they wanted to be when they grew up: astronauts, doctors, firefighters - and knowing the challenges the children faced with these current statistics.

Opportunities for outreach allow us to engage in bridge-building and mutual learning between individuals and communities. What wonderful opportunities organizations such as St. Paul’s with their Shelter & After-School program, or Apostles’ House, or St. Phillip’s Academy in Newark, or City Camp and St. James School in North Philadelphia offer us in *not* becoming isolated, not becoming numbed to the needs of those in pain or despair and thereby deluding ourselves that we are quite self-sufficient, in no need of God’s grace & mercy. What wonderful opportunities they offer us to become actively engaged with ministries which are transforming for us as well as others. What wonderful opportunities they offer us to “seek and serve Christ in all persons”; to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being” (BCP, p. 305). And in striving for justice, to ask some tough questions such as, “What’s wrong with this picture? What are the deeper issues here? And what are we going to do about it?”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:37-40)

The Rev. Joan Conley