

Partners in Ministry

Living Water Community Church welcomes youth from Metamora Mennonite Church By Mark Thannum

During the week of August 1, three high school students, Ozzy Suratt, Peter Lock, and Trey Brown, from Metamora Mennonite Church travelled to Chicago to assist Living Water Community Church with their Vacation Bible School program. It was a week of growth and new experiences for the three young men from Central Illinois as they invested their time in the children who attended VBS, learned about life and God's impact on local neighborhoods, and developed new relationships with fellow students from Living Water. It was also a testament to God's planning and provision.

The idea of this trip actually was hatched during last year's high school winter retreat at Mennohaven. During that time, as they had the year before as junior high students, the students from Metamora Mennonite and Living Water interacted with each other very well. From the world's point of view, this would seem strange since the Metamora students were primarily from small farming communities and their Living Water counterparts were from the inner-city. However, God just brought these young people together in a very positive and natural way. Before the



youth groups scattered back to their respective towns, Ozzy approached Mark Thannum, one of the Metamora adult leaders and asked if they could partner with Living Water on some sort of mission project in the near future. Mark talked with Steve Lamb, the Living Water youth leader and they agreed to keep in touch about the possibilities of working together.

Through later email correspondence, Steve informed Mark of the VBS program conducted at Living Water each summer and how their youth were heavily involved. Steve invited the Metamora students to come to Chicago for a week to help with VBS. There were some logistical roadblocks including finances,

conflicts with summer activities, and one student whose family was planning to move. However, Metamora Mennonite held a fund raising spaghetti supper that provided the money, and God worked out all the schedules, including the family move, to allow the three students to participate. A conflict even arose for Mark as he changed positions at his job and was not able to attend for the entire week. Randy Miller, interim pastor at Metamora Mennonite, graciously stepped in and accompanied the guys to Chicago for the first part of the week.

Once all the logistical details were out



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of the way, Randy and the guys headed to Chicago on Sunday, July 31. Each morning, Tim Williams, a local urban minister would discuss social justice issues with the team. This also included walks through various nearby neighborhoods where Tim would describe the socio-economic conditions, gang issues and other challenges that were definitely different than these students usually encountered in Central Illinois. Rogers Park itself is extremely diverse, and not just racially. There are immigrants living there from all over the world and you can often hear several different languages being spoken if you sit in a local coffee shop or Chicago Transit Authority station for any period of time. This was an incredibly positive experience for the guys and opened their eyes to a world beyond their normal experiences. From the discussions that we conducted during “down” times throughout the week, these sessions had a big impact on them and their view of the world. Tim did an incredible job of relating these situations in an honest, straightforward, but not overly-sensationalized manner.

The local children arrived for VBS at noon each day. These children were very representative of the neighborhood, including multiple races and ethnic backgrounds. There was even a Muslim boy who attended, which said a lot for Living Water Church in

that his parents trusted the church enough to send him to a Christian event. Although there are a handful of adults there to guide the process, most of the focused work with the children was performed by the junior high and high school students. The children were divided up in “crews” with each crew containing children from fifth grade down to kindergarten. Two to three youth were assigned to each crew as crew leaders. As leaders, their responsibilities included helping the children with lunch, bible memory verses, crafts, games and other

activities. This enabled the students to build relationships with the children, which had an obvious positive impact on both parties. The students from Living Water and Metamora Mennonite jumped right in and were fully engaged with the children, which provided opportunities for the students to build relationships both spiritually and socially with the children. The children responded in kind and were excited with the attention paid to them by the “big kids”. There were also times for the students to get to know and bond with each other, including some free time before the children arrived as well as a couple of after-VBS trips to local basketball courts and to the beach. On the way home, there was a lot of talk from the Metamora Mennonite guys about the new friends they had made and how they were looking forward to seeing their Living Water peers at camp next winter.

Overall it was an excellent trip and a great opportunity for two different churches in different communities to work together. Hopefully, the relationships built and lessons learned over that week will continue to impact these students as they head back to their respective schools this fall. For all the division and strife we hear about on a daily basis, it was exciting to see these young people and Living Water Community Church provide a beacon of light in the darkness.