

Georgetown church sends Vacation Bible School to camp_72505

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First-through-third graders belt out songs at the closing service of Camp Crestview. (Photos by Craig Bird)

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By Craig Bird

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GEORGETOWN-Ten years ago, Crestview Baptist Church decided to send its Vacation Bible School to camp. The church-and the community-have not been the same since.

This summer, 900 youngsters from kindergarten to sixth grade took over the Georgetown congregation's facilities, while 260 volunteers told stories, played games, produced musicals, cooked meals, pushed swings and did

whatever else it took to share the gospel.

Families from as far away as Indiana plan vacations to see family and friends in Central Texas so their children can participate, and happy campers from as far away as Austin make the daily commute to join in.


Senior adults at Crestview Baptist Church have taken over the meal and snack preparation for Camp Crestview, enduring the summer heat for two weeks.

Even with limited church promotion—just posting information on the church sign and website—people line up to register the first day, aware that enrollment fills up fast.

This year, the church added a second one-week camp, which allowed increased enrollment.

“That's 200 more kids than our average total Sunday school attendance of

700, and we had 40 percent of our regular attendance staffing Camp Crestview,” Pastor Dan Wooldridge said. “Nothing we do—and we do a lot all around the world—has had a bigger impact on us moving from a little-known neighborhood church to a well-known regional church over the past decade.”

The church had its last traditional Vacation Bible School in 1995, prior to Wooldridge's arrival. It drew about 40 children, almost entirely from its membership. So, when time came to plan the 1996 version, Lisa Burkett, the new coordinator of children's ministries, recalled her own experiences as a working mom and suggested a radical overhaul.

“Two impressions kept coming back to me,” Burkett said. “One was that in my years in the corporate world, I was frustrated because my children could never participate in VBS because the schedule didn't work. A half-day, starting at 9 a.m. couldn't fit the schedule, and I knew that most working moms had the same problem. The other was that every March I'd see the magazine supplement in the Austin newspaper about summer camps. There were hundreds of them, but none were church camps.”



Pastor Dan Woolridge of Crestview Baptist Church in Georgetown, welcomes parents of the first-through-third grade campers to a week-ending musical. Woolridge says Camp Crestview is a major factor in the transformation of the church from a little-known neighborhood church to a high-profile regional congregation.

So, she suggested an all-day, all-week program where parents could drop their kids off on their way to work and pick them up after work—for less than they'd pay for childcare.

“That was a big step, because people protested that you can't charge for VBS,” Burkett recalled. “But we weren't doing VBS anymore; we were doing camp.”

If fact, Vacation Bible School terminology has been banned from the

vocabulary of Camp Crestview.

“Not because VBS isn't a good thing; it is. And not because we don't use VBS material, because we do,” she added. “But what we were doing was much more than VBS, and, besides, kids weren't excited about VBS, but going to camp was cool.”

The first year the church charged \$10, response quickly surpassed expectations.

“When we hit 175 registrations, I was thinking, 'Stop, stop, we can't handle this many,'" Burkett said. Final headcount was 200. That was the first and last year the church promoted the event aggressively. But the numbers keep growing.

“What we've done since then is simply ask people to pray about families they might want to participate. If God puts a family on their heart, they should make sure they get registration information,” she explained. “We ask God to send us those he wants us to work with, and we just trust him to do that.”

God also sends the volunteers, Wooldridge said.

“Camp Crestview has become part of the culture of the church,” he said. “We have very successful business people who take vacation time to work in the camp, because they see what God does there. I'd guess one-third of our volunteers are men, and this is especially important, since many of the children who come to the camp do not have a father in the home. They bond with our men at camp, which meets a real need in their lives.

“Our senior adults have taken over the food program, too. We used to have the meals catered, but they decided they could cook as well as serve. We have about 50 seniors out in this hot sun for two weeks—and five of them are in their 80s. They have a ball.”

The church certainly hoped to be successful in its primary goal of “winning lost children to Christ,” but Burkett has been amazed at an unanticipated benefit.

“I see so many teenagers who came up through the camp program who now are working in the camp alongside their parents. Families doing ministry together is a great thing. It's happened to us. My husband takes vacation to volunteer, and we plan and pray and rejoice as a family.”

A key element is anticipation built into the program. There are three distinct programs for three age groups.

The camp for fifth and sixth graders especially is different, Burkett explained.

“In traditional VBS, you do pretty much the same thing every year, but we have specific activities according to age. We want the kindergartners looking with envy at what the first through fourth graders are doing,” she said.

The preteens have their own camp pastor, a live band and a full schedule of field trips just for them.

“That is the hardest age group to reach for VBS, but we capped enrollment at 155 this year and had a waiting list,” she added.

Both Wooldridge and Burkett say they frequently hear from other churches intrigued by the camp approach, but invariably the response is “that would work here too, but we'd never get our people to volunteer to make it happen.”

Wooldridge said it proves the Scripture, “You have not because you ask not.”

“Too often as Baptists we apologize for asking our people to do something,”

he said. "Our experience has been that people respond if you ask them to do something for God that is worth doing."

Burkett compares it to promoting a mission trip.

"We ask people to give their time and vacation to work with children who need to learn about Jesus," she explained. "That's no different than asking them to pray about going overseas, except that you can sleep in your own bed at night, drink the water and don't have to get shots. But if we're going to ask them to make that commitment and do that work, we better do everything we can do to make the camp a real God thing. And that is what's happened here."

Burkett is emphatic in pointing out that the camp approach is not for everybody.

"If you have a thriving, vibrant VBS, don't even think about something like this because God is blessing what you are doing. But if you are surrounded by kids you aren't reaching, then maybe you should consider it," she concluded. "And if you think you can't get the workers you need, don't sell your people short. Create the vision, and ask them. God will take it from there."

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