

Late-summer camp offers respite for Hill Country kids

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LEAKEY—Kids from Trinity Baptist Church in Kerrville received a much-needed time of fun and rest following last month's devastating floods in their area.

Leaders took a group of third through fifth graders to Alto Frio Baptist Encampment in Leakey on July 21-24—helping these young campers to start taking the first steps towards hope and healing in the aftermath of devastation.



"It was definitely a camp after a crisis, but our church really pulled together to rally around us in prayer," said children's minister Kellee Parish.

"The church made prayer cards for the campers, and the counselors received so many encouraging texts throughout the week. Prayer is so vital, and it's how we are able to keep moving during this time."

In response to the tragedy at nearby Camp Mystic, organizers of Alto Frio Camp immediately began taking extra precautions to ensure the safety and peace of mind of campers and their families.

Leaders at Alto Frio had already postponed the July 14 start of a youth camp with 500 students to ensure road conditions would allow churches

enough time to arrive safely. To help streamline communication, camp organizers also began posting updates on their social media pages to include the condition of the Frio River along with the camp's emergency response plans.

Opportunity for kids to 'experience normalcy'

Trinity Baptist Pastor John Wheat said he was confident in the policies and procedures Alto Frio had provided.

"Even during a time of tragedy, there is still a great opportunity to help kids grow in their faith at camp," Wheat said. "I visited the kids at Alto Frio, and I got to see kids having a blast during worship and trusting the camp experience.

"It was a great opportunity for the kids to learn about trusting God and their leaders. It was exciting as a pastor to see that kids were experiencing normalcy, though there was a tragedy in our community, and that families were able to take a leap of faith and trust the camp experience."

Parish noted their group only had a couple of visitors who chose not to send their children to camp, but she acknowledged a few other churches dropped out for various reasons.

"Before camp, we had a parent meeting, but surprisingly we didn't receive a lot of questions from parents," she said. "Most parents understood that Alto Frio was located on a different river, and we would be taking extra precautions to safeguard the children we were being entrusted with at camp.

'Good to see kids just being kids'

The church booked its week at camp before knowing a ministry called Xtreme Obedience, which exhibits the obedience skills of dogs, would be there, Parish said.

"It was good timing to have the dogs at the camp because they were almost like therapy dogs and provided a calming presence for the kids," she said. "It brought a sense of normalcy to camp and helped the kids to have a chance to get away and get back to some normalcy. It was good to see kids laugh and have fun once again. ... It was so good to see kids just being kids."

Although there was a thunderstorm during camp that made some of the campers a little nervous, Parish said in the Lord's timing and provision, having Xtreme Obedience and its dogs at the campsite reminded them God was in control even during the storms of life.

"I'm so grateful that parents allowed their kids to go to camp," Parish said. "As a leader, it can be a daunting task taking kids to camp after a crisis, but it definitely makes you more aware of your surroundings and the kids you have been entrusted with."

'Supernatural place of safety, comfort and peace'

Keith Smith, pastor of South Sub Church in Littleton, Colo., was the camp speaker and also saw first-hand how the campers and counselors were benefiting from being at camp.

"I went into the week praying for the kids and leaders since they had experienced so much tragedy and trauma from the flood." Smith said. "I

was also aware of what that some of the kids had experienced because of the trauma from school shooting in Uvalde in May 2022. That's a lot of trauma for kids so young.

"A personal prayer that I wrote in my own journal was, 'Would you send your Spirit to descend on the camp? Make it a supernatural place of safety, comfort and peace.'"

The camp theme was "GLOW"—an acronym for grace, love, obedience and worship, taken from Ephesians 5:8.

"Throughout the week I never sensed anything different than any of the other 18 years I had preached at the camp," Smith said. "It was like God did indeed create a safe place for the kids. One night there was rolling thunder and some lightning throughout the night. The next morning the kids seemed as if nothing had transpired.

"The adult leaders are the heroes. They gave up their physical and emotional energy when they probably had very little left by the end of the week."

Although their time at Alto Frio helped provide a week of relief for the campers, Parish acknowledged that it is a long road ahead for Kerrville.

"We are in this for the long haul," she said. "Our community is now out of the media and the limelight, but our community is still dealing with the devastating effects of this tragedy. Many people are dealing with PTSD. ... This camp provided an opportunity for kids to just be kids and begin to return to a sense of normalcy, but we definitely covet your prayers."