

Standing at the front of a small conference room at the House of Mercy last week, I took a breath and called out, “God is good!” listening as the youth responded, “All the time!” Then calling again, “And all the time!....” “God is good!” How true this proved to be as the ROC SALT Mission Center’s first pilot mission experience unfolded in our midst. Twenty-nine children, ranging from sixth to twelfth grade, along with their leaders from five different churches across the Presbytery, gathered together for 48 hours to serve and learn, to laugh and reflect, to make new friends and dare new experiences. What joy I felt watching the youth form a new community across differences in socioeconomic levels, educational opportunities, life experiences, gender and race that might well have stopped their older community members.

In the course of our time together, we spread out across Rochester to lend a hand at St. Joe’s House of Hospitality (soup kitchen and emergency shelter), Mary’s Place (refugee assistance), Harbor House (long-term stay for families of organ transplant patients), the South Wedge Food Program (food pantry), FoodLink (food assistance warehouse) and the House of Mercy (homeless shelter). We sorted mail, filed records, stacked cans, chopped vegetables, cooked meals, created welcome bags, organized clothing, addressed envelopes, washed walls and, most important of all, listened to the stories of the people we met.

New experiences for some combined with familiar ones for others to create a tapestry of shared experience in which some offered their wisdom and others were brave enough to ask their questions. As a group left to travel by bus, those who had never seen a bus pass asked others how to navigate the system. Those who felt comfortable talking to just about anyone, offered advice to those who felt shy and preferred to hang back. Together, we pooled our resources to work as a team to accomplish the tasks at hand. We as leaders were all so impressed to see how the youth helped one another, pitched in to do chores and quickly created a new community from disparate parts.

On our final morning, we boarded a school bus along with a dozen or so Presbytery members to experience the Social Welfare Action Alliance’s *Reality Tour*, which took us around Rochester to learn about the experience of poverty through lenses of healthcare, education, housing, and food. As we ate our lunches at the House of Mercy that day, the staff remarked on the depth of the questions our youth posed and wondered aloud why this group seemed so different from others they had hosted. Finally, our host decided, “maybe it’s because you’re from the church.” I don’t know if that is the reason, of course, but I will say I had a strong sense of the Holy Spirit in the room that day.

As we stopped periodically to reflect on our experiences, to ask questions, to wonder what the Bible tells us and how our faith calls us to respond, I heard youth talking about the opening of their minds, the transformation of their understanding, the joy and satisfaction of being able to help someone. And I heard their requests for more time to play together, more time to help people, more time to be on the

mission. Spending time with such generous-hearted youth filled me with hope and encouragement for the decades to come when these young people will become our teachers and nurses, our business owners and politicians, our pastors and our soldiers.

Certainly, our pilot mission had its ups and downs – we ran out of spoons for our evening chili; there weren't enough mural panels to paint; we had to redirect some of our workers at the last minute. But at the end of the day, none of those small challenges seemed to matter. Our community came together to create an experience that invited God into our midst, and allowed us to create new community, to serve alongside our neighbors and to wonder together how we could make our corner of the world a better place.

Special thanks are due to Rev. Katie Styr, Rev. Katrina Hebb, and Ms. Debby Maar, who caught the vision and took this chance to “do a new thing,” bringing their youth to us for the mission and along the way also providing leadership and creative ideas while maintaining a sense of humor and a generous spirit. We are indebted to the teams at South Presbyterian Church and Ogden Presbyterian Church who each provided a meal for our hungry, tired masses; to Linc Spaulding who served as our official photographer; to Rev. Deb Swift who played the piano for worship one evening; to the many chaperones who joined us for various parts of the experience and to the Teen Center at the Monroe Family YMCA who welcomed us all for dinner and games on Wednesday night. Indeed, it takes a community to create such an event and thanks are due as well to all those who believed in this effort and voted last November to provide resources to make it happen. We are all in this together and each step of the way, I am reminded: God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good.

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