

Camping and Retreat Ministries

2020 Board Report

Karen Dillon, Director

After last year's District Conference, the Camping and Retreat Ministries experienced a surge of growth and a higher level of enthusiasm. The past year had been good and the future events were promising. A lot of optimism was circulating in the churches and in the committee.

Cookie Camp was a big success right before the holidays. Camp Ambassadors sent in their orders which showed an increase over 2018's fund raiser. Another shift of cookie baking had to be added to meet the need for more cookies. We started on Friday afternoon, worked through the evening, and completed the sale on Saturday. The new scheduled worked out well. Three shifts accommodated different times for people to volunteer. All the cookies were sold and distributed by the Ambassadors and workers. Our profit was \$1,777.

Winter Blast was the first event of 2020. It was very successful with campers of all ages and lots of adults to help. The schedule was a bit different from the past, because the recreation center, where we swim, couldn't find enough life guards for the pool to be open on Friday. So we swam in the late morning before lunch on Saturday. The weekend adventure was filled with games, devotions, Bible studies, stories, movies, and relaxing in cozy cabins. The campers and adults were up late Friday evening and slept late on Saturday morning. A highlight of the time together was sharing kid-friendly meals around the tables. All the campers stuffed themselves with pancakes for breakfast and grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch. As they ate their meals, conversations and talking with new friends further cemented the feeling of being a part of God's great family. From the arrival time until the closing circle, excited and happy energy was everywhere. For some campers, this was their first taste of camp. Two new campers told me they were already looking forward to coming to summer camp. Although tired when leaving, one camper asked if he really had to go home just before he yawned.

The 2020 Winter Blast was so well attended that we were at our capacity to comfortably fit into Cricket Holler. The need to split the event into two groups was apparent to the camp staff. Two weekends are needed to allow for the potential growth of this event. The split would be for campers in kindergarten through 5th grade with adult helpers to be in one weekend, middle school and high school campers in another weekend. What a wonderful problem to have outgrown one weekend and need to expand to another.

Ted Foster and I worked during February to create all the camp brochures. The upcoming camping season was promising; with many choices for camping experiences and lots of people volunteering. All the brochures were beautiful. The

printing was completed by the gracious support of the Brethren Retirement Community. Little did I know when I picked them up that they would never be sent out.

Then the Covid-19 virus hit.

Life as we had expected vanished. The future was uncertain.

I cancelled the Ambassadors' Meeting. Next the Simple Living Weekend was called off. Regular activities of school, church, going to the movies, eating out, shopping, visiting family and on and on stopped. We were all confined to our homes unless we were first responders or essential workers. As I watched all the events and life of our society close down, I seriously thought, how can we ever have camp. With everything taken away, fear and high safety concerns, could we still host some type of camp experience for campers? Was it possible? Camp is so important!

New technologies began to replace old connections for people and established different formats for gathering communities. One format was Zoom. With the help of Dave Shetler, I began to formulate a plan to have camp using Zoom as our platform. Dave patiently taught me the skills to host and run Zoom meetings. This was a whole new way of doing things that shoved me out of my comfort zone very quickly.

The Camping and Retreat Ministries Committee met through Zoom meetings to plan how to implement camp. We decided that each day of the week, one camp or age group, would meet. An eight-week commitment was determined, making camp run from June through July. The breakdown was:

Monday - Pre K - 2nd grades
Tuesday - 3rd - 5th grades
Wednesday - 6th - 8th grades
Thursday - 9th - 12th grades
Friday - Family Camp

Charlene and I made contacts with many people to fill the slots needed to do this vital, virtual work. An eight-week commitment was asking a lot from people, but many answered the call to help. Two young women, who were furloughed from their jobs, volunteered. Teams of the volunteers began planning all the activities. Bible studies, games, crafts used the curriculum called "This Is Our Prayer." Each team met separately through Zoom to make the preparations. We didn't have much time to get everything ready since it was the beginning of May, and camp started in June.

At residential camp, all the supplies and materials are on hand. How could we overcome this big problem with a virtual camp? We decided that the committee would deliver bags filled with the supplies, paperwork, craft items, games, and anything needed for the sessions. That meant all plans had to be firm for each of the eight sessions for each of the five days. I began ordering all kinds of markers, glue, tape, paper, construction paper, plastic eggs, tongue depressors, pipe cleaners, bags, beads, feathers, crowns from Burger King, battery candles, etc. Then I printed off all

the pages necessary to accompany the lessons. Carl Hill spent hours designing a wonderful coloring book for each Bible lesson he would be teaching. My family room began looking like an Amazon warehouse with tables filled with stacks of supplies and unusual things.

I was expecting to make 60 bags, one for each camper and volunteer, thinking I would have a registration of 25 to 35 campers plus 15 to 20 volunteers. I was shocked to have over 60 campers register. I had to quickly get more supplies. Thank goodness my daughter had an Amazon Prime account and could get things within a day or two.

A week before camp was to begin, a very small group of us got together to organize and fill the bags. Each bag had a tag on it with the camper's name and address. All the lessons, crafts, and goodies were included. It took two days to pack all the items. Some wonderful volunteers delivered all the bags to the campers, just before camp began. Those people living away from the Dayton area received their bags through the mail.

That was one of the benefits of this virtual camp. People from far away could join us without traveling. Two girls who had recently moved from this area attended camp. A family from Maine was able to be a part of Family Camp. Kids in Columbus and boy in Illinois were part of the Junior Camp. Even a volunteer who was called back to work in Williamsburg, Virginia, was able to attend camp through Zoom.

The eight weeks of camp flew by much faster than I had anticipated. Although I heard five versions of a Bible study each week, it was never boring. All the leaders had their own touch in relating the stories and lessons. Lots of YouTube videos made their way into the lessons. Ben Tipton made videos for us to sing new and old camp songs. Discussions were lively.

Some campers came every time, while others dropped in occasionally. A few never came at all. Those who regularly attended were always engaged and seemed happy to be involved. The bags of supplies were a big hit and fun to investigate. Campers could use the supplies in many ways after the camp sessions. One father said he had to put the supplies out of reach of a younger sibling, because a green marker found itself all over some walls, skin, and clothing.

Sometimes the older kids stayed on the Zoom meeting after camp to just talk with other kids. Two girls who had lost touch, because of a family move, were reunited. Their happiness was quite apparent when they talked together for over an hour after camp on Zoom. The middle school kids liked to talk more than any other group.

Charlene Foster and Lee Saylor were great helpers who came to every camp. Charlene maintained attendance and volunteer information. Lee was our technical support supervisor who handled all the videos and screen problem solving.

Thanks to Laura Brown, our camps were treated with a special video by Ken Medema, explaining the background for his song “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying.” She bravely emailed Ken, asking him to tell us how he came to write the song. She explained we were using his song at each camp meeting, because it perfectly fit our camp theme of “This Is Our Prayer.” His wonderful video to us was part of the closing for each camp.

Virtual camp was exciting and fulfilling. While we were each in our home settings, everyone was safe. We didn’t have to wear masks, but we could see and talk with each other. Togetherness at camp held a new meaning.

The **Women’s Retreat (Oct. 23 - 24)** will also be held virtually in a few weeks. The planning team has designed an interesting retreat on prayer. Again, bags of supplies and goodies will be delivered to those who register. Registration is open by mail and online, but must be in by October 15, so that bags can be delivered or sent. It promises to be another memorable experience. And we will all be safe.

What does the future hold? I don’t know. I do know that God will guide me to find creative ways to serve the District. God is pushing for me to adapt and mold programs to fit the changes happening in life.

Camp changes lives. It certainly has changed my life this year. I have grown in many new skills, have seen others grow in service and spirit, and watched the ministries of Camping and Retreat expand to welcome more people into God’s great family. Thank you for being with me on this journey.

Karen Dillon
Director of Camping and Retreat Ministries