

One-of-a-kind program

Synod School heads toward a record enrollment this summer

By David Lewellen

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Nearly 700 people of all ages will descend upon a small town in Iowa July 23-28 to sing, study, worship, and play. Synod School, offered by the Synod of Lakes and Prairies at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa, is thriving — and unusual, since it is the only such Presbyterian program left in the country.

“It feeds people in such holistic ways — body, mind and soul,” said Deb DeMeester, the synod’s director of leadership development, who is in her second year of overseeing the program after years as a participant. Many attendees consider it the best week of the summer, she said, and “seeing children and youth enjoying each other, dancing during worship, tie-dying T-shirts — it’s a really unique experience in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”

“Every year I go, something really stands out,” said Paul Penn, the associate dean of the school and an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Sioux Falls, Iowa. “Maybe it’s the convocation speaker, or a class, or a worship service, but I always come back with a more positive outlook on everything.”

Attendance this summer may set an all-time record, DeMeester said, with 27 states and one foreign country represented. A particular attraction this year is that the keynote — or convocation — speaker will be J. Herbert Nelson, stated clerk of the PC(USA) General Assembly.

Presbyterian synods across the country have offered less programming in recent years, and traditional Christian summer camps have declined in popularity amid competition for leisure time. To be bucking those trends, “we’re delighted that for children and youth, Synod School is a high priority,” DeMeester said. “That speaks volumes.”

The week is designed to keep whole families busy, including many grandparents who bring their grandchildren. DeMeester said that in 2016, participants’ ages ranged from 5 weeks to over 90 years. In addition to the usual crafts and Bible study, this year the school has added yoga for children and convocation speakers for youths in grades 6-12.

Penn and his wife, Pat, have been regulars for nine years, and frequently attend with their adult children and school-age grandchildren. “But we’re so busy, we don’t get a lot of time to sit down and be family,” he noted.

“My family and I love it,” said Katie Estes, this year’s dean of the school and the co-pastor of First Presbyterian Church in South St. Paul, Minn. Her children, ages 17 and 15, “have grown up in that environment. They have close friends that they only see at Synod School.”

Many people comment on the sense of hospitality and inclusion at the event, “but that doesn’t happen by accident,” Estes said. “We’re taking on the care and feeding of 600-plus people.” First-timers who don’t have a network of old friends to greet are singled out for welcome and get their own tables in the dining hall.

Participants are kept busy during the day with classes and worship, and evening activities may include open-mic coffee house, a movie, or one-hour mini courses. “It’s not a restful vacation,” Estes said wryly. “We certainly don’t let people get bored.” But some people do choose “to hang out with their family or just take a walk by the lake.”

The 100-plus teenagers who attend can take some adult courses, but there are also plenty of chances to examine their emerging sense of self. Joel Morien, the youth director at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Appleton, Wis., helps facilitate “deep meaningful conversations,” when the teens write questions on slips of paper which are drawn out of a hat for discussion. “No one’s judging them or looking at them differently because of their faith,” Morien said. “At school, there’s so much pressure to have the right answer or to know your future. Here, they can step back a bit.”

Facilitating those discussions takes patience, Bible knowledge, and “grace is a very big factor,” Morien said. “There are definitely some conflicting ideas on pretty serious topics, like abortion or the death penalty. Or on truth. That was a big one.”

The program gets staff support from the synod, but is produced and run almost entirely by volunteers (although teachers do attend tuition-free). But producing a successful event takes both volunteers and institutional commitment. Estes said, “This one piece gets lots of energy and attention and staff resources.”

Class offerings for adults range widely over theology (the Reformation at 500, the last days of Jesus), current events (white privilege, LGBTQ integration), worship (new choir repertoire, how to write liturgy), personal growth (aging gracefully, stress management), and fun (basket weaving, outdoor cooking). Much of the planning team’s work, Estes said, involves sorting through proposals and trying to achieve a good balance of time slots, subject matter, teachers, and topics.

“There’s a great sense of community,” Penn said. “We don’t agree on everything by any means — we’re Presbyterians, after all — but there’s a real sense of fellowship.”