

It was the last full week of school for the St Mary's School eighth grade students. 42 students (along with 8 adult volunteers), boys and girls alike, were being sent out, like the 72 disciples of Jesus, on a mission to preach the gospel, the "good news", but not so much in word as in deed. And like those first disciples, they went out with little more than the clothes on their backs – well, sort of – they brought their blow-up mattresses, sleeping bags, and change of clothes, but, like the disciples, they too stayed in one place until it was time to move on – Pax Christi Church in Eden Prairie.

This mission trip was not so much designed as a break from school or a senior trip, but was truly a mission to walk in another's shoes and get their hands dirty alongside the handicapped who are working to integrate themselves into societal life as active and productive members, moving beyond their own limitations, and the expectations of "normal" people. The kids were challenged to truly be the Body of Christ – His hands and feet on earth today.

This program was put on for our youth by *The Center for Ministry Development* under the name "Just5Days" with the theme "Now, YOU are the Body of Christ". Typically, this program is designed to gather upwards of 100 kids from a variety of Catholic parishes and schools around the country to stay at and work in larger cities, giving youth and their chaperones an "experience of service, hands-on learning activities, prayer and liturgy, and community building". The purpose of the program is for "Middle schoolers to learn about Catholic social teaching, how their faith calls them to serve compassionately and work for justice. Dynamic daily prayer services and the celebration of our closing liturgy, engage youth in full and active participation, helping to make their faith more tangible."

Although this program is intended to bring youth (about 5-10 from each school/parish) from many places and intermingle them in groups of "new" faces, the program for our youth was special in that it the whole 8th grade went as an integral unit. Another feature that was different for our group is that typically the youth that go on these mission trips WANT to go on them, they WANT to serve others, whereas this was more of a "classroom activity" in which everyone HAD to participate. Our kids put in a LOT of service hours during the school year, but nothing like what they experienced on this trip, and no amount of whiteboard lectures could have given them more a sense of comradery, sacrifice, and self-worth than what they got out of this trip.

I watched 10 kids pick up trash (and a dead squirrel) around an up-scale community center, clean windows and endless lines of exercise equipment, carry on conversations with persons with mental and physical impairments, and then join those same people for lunch and help THEM in their communication skills. Talk about being a proud parent, and none of these kids are even mine!! The other groups pulled weeds and cleared garden areas, separated and categorized clothing at a thrift store, and cleaned tons of toys at a child development center, just to say a little about all they did. In the four days (these kids were really good – they completed 5 days in just 4) they all worked, played, ate, prayed, and slept together (yes - separate guys' rooms and gal's rooms) they also grew closer to one another, sharing not only in experiences, but in friendship and real caring for one other.

They may not have had the WANT to be on the mission, but the mission had a WANT to change their lives, even if just a little or for a short time. Seeds of faith, seeds of compassion for the plight of others, seeds of an "I can do" attitude take time to grow, but if they are not FIRST PLANTED there is never a real chance for growth. My prayer would be that over the coming years parents, teachers, truly good friends and teammates will nurture those seeds by offering opportunities and encouragement to grow into unselfish souls who care for the wellbeing of those around them. Let this be all our prayer.