

Christmas in July

Missionaries, Indian kids are 'one in the spirit'

What would it be like to travel 600 miles north to a small Indian church in the Upper Peninsula and teach vacation Bible school? Sixteen youths and their counselors from St. Matthew's United Methodist Church in Livonia did it and found out that it was an exciting and rewarding experience.

The idea began with parishoner Duane Johnson, who 10 years ago had made such a trip to teach the Indian children. He was the only person who knew what the church and the people were like. The plan would be as it had been 10 years ago, Johnson decided. That called for the youth and adults to camp in Baraga State Park and drive to the church just overlooking Keewenaw Bay each day.

The young people were to do the teaching while the adults helped provide crafts, recreation and refreshments. As a training experience, they first taught identical materials to the children in their own church.

ALL WINTER and spring the St. Matthew youth people raised money to finance the trip. The people of the church donated craft supplies and cookies. The youth borrowed camping equipment from the Boy Scouts.

The theme chosen for the week was "One in the Spirit." Special shirts were silk screened with this motto and the symbol of the Methodist cross and flame.

On the Sunday before the group set out, the contingent of 16 youths and eight adults was dedicated in a St. Matthew's service, each person wearing the special shirts.

Some of the enthusiasm, however, was dampened when the group had to set up tents in the state park in the midst of a rain storm. The skies cleared by the next morning and the group easily located the Indian mission church on the shores of Lake Superior. A state of Michigan historical marker

stood in front of the church stating that the mission had begun in 1832. The present church building was over 100 years old, the group learned.

Then the children began to arrive. At first, they were shy and quiet as they met the blue-shirted strangers from Livonia. But things got better as the children relaxed.

EACH DAY SAW more and more children appear. One was accompanied by a white dog who trailed one of the little Indian girls and wouldn't leave her side.

"The only alternative," said Johnson, "was to hang a name tag around the dog's neck — after the little girl promised to give it a bath."

The young people found that the excitement built each day as more and more children arrived.

Karen Sanford of Westland said, "I think it's fun to work with these little kids. They are all having fun, too."

Jennie Chiles of Livonia, who wants to become a psychologist, said, "These people are so different from us, yet we can help them learn. What is best is that they told their friends and more came the next day."

"I feel closer to our youth group since being here," said Kelly Hargan of Livonia.

THE YOUTH GROUP took several afternoon side trips, including one to the old Indian cemetery, a copper mine in Hancock and several to water falls in the area.

But the real highlight of the weekend was the surprise "Christmas in July" celebration complete with a visit by Santa Claus. Christmas tree lights were strung, presents were made and wrapped and ornaments hung. Other campers in the state park were surprised to hear Christmas carols being sung by a large group at the other end of the park. Finally, some could not contain their curiosity and came over to see what was going on.

"And the lights remained on throughout an evening rainstorm," said Johnson.

"IT WAS ONE OF those crazy things that appeals to kids. At first, they were a little embarrassed but all that changed once they got into it," said St. Matthew's pastor, David Strong.

Another high point came when the group was invited to an Indian pow-wow at the Indian campgrounds in Baraga. More than 3,000 Indians were present for the weekend event.

But the real highlight of the weekend was the surprise "Christmas in July" celebration complete with a visit by Santa Claus.

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Jennie Schuerman and Mike Baldwin, both of Northville, lead singing with children from Zebs Indian Mission in L'Anse, Mich.

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