

Janet Grzeszkowiak from St. Ann Parish, and Joy Fuchs from Transfiguration Parish, both with Faith & Light, came up with a great idea: So many Catholic parishes have a Vacation Bible School (VBS) week for their young parishioners. What if a parish would extend their VBS week a bit, tacking on a weekday evening or perhaps a weekend afternoon, choosing from among all the awesome VBS activities, and inviting individuals with disabilities for a VBS type of event? Janet and Joy shared their idea with Jeanne Lyons, the Special Needs Religious Education Coordinator at St. Peter Chanel, where Janet and Joy's daughters attend Crossbeams Bible Study. St. Peter Chanel Parish decided to give it a try this summer. Fifteen participants with disabilities registered to attend. SPC parishioners with backgrounds in education, special education, speech therapy, and substitute teaching, plus some teens and children volunteered, and some of the VBS decorations were left up for this afternoon event, held on the Sunday following SPC's VBS week. Maggie Rousseau, Director of the Archdiocese of Atlanta's Disability Ministry came as well. The event was called VBS+ and was a huge success, as you can see in the following photos.





After gathering for prayer to kickoff our VBS+ Camp Firelight afternoon, we used fabric markers to decorate our “camp” t-shirts. Those who really enjoy coloring, who finished their shirts early, could color additional pages that were used during the VBS week. Coloring can be especially relaxing for some folks.



Here, we're acting out the story of how Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

In this scene, the apostles are getting into a boat with Jesus.



Jesus was so tired that he fell asleep in the boat, as he and his friends traveled across the Sea of Galilee to proclaim the kingdom of God to more people.



Suddenly, there was a terrible storm on the Sea of Galilee!
The waves tossed the boat to the point that even the apostles
who were experienced fishermen thought they were all going
to drown!



The apostles frantically woke Jesus up! He asked them, “Don’t you have faith yet?” Here, Jesus is standing up in the boat and telling the waves and the wind to be still. Suddenly, at Jesus’ command, the Sea of Galilee was calm once again. Jesus showed God’s power, and that his friends can trust him to calm their fears.

After our Bible story dramatization, we wrote on index cards some of the things that worry or scare us.

(Meanwhile, the 12 parents who had chosen to come along with their VBS+ “camper” had the option of retreating to a separate room where coffee and snacks were set up for them. Stephen Ministers and Deacon Claro Rodriguez greeted them in this room, and they let the parents know that Stephen Ministers could serve them, any time, whenever they felt a need for prayerful support. Megan Walsh, a social worker who leads the Bridges to Understanding support group for parents of individuals with disabilities, also had helpful resources to share with parents.)



After having a fun VBS snack together, our “campers” moved into a “science room” and Joy Fuchs, who has a background in teaching science, led an awesome activity in which we got to test some interesting samples of rocks that God has made, marking our test results on a chart. One of the many things we learned is that it’s possible to write with some rocks and minerals, like a mineral called Kaolin.

After our rock and mineral studies, smooth river rocks were passed out, on which we wrote the word “trust” with black permanent markers.



Before heading to the 5:00 Mass together, we gathered once again for prayer. Our trust rocks had been placed around a fake campfire. We read some of the worries and fears that we had written on index cards. Each person put a worry card into the fake campfire and could pick up a trust rock to take home. Jeanne began to lead the group in prayer, when suddenly Ty stood up because he sensed that the Holy Spirit was putting a prayer into his heart. Ty knew that he should share his prayer with us all, so he moved to the front and began to lead us. His prayer was exactly what we all needed to help us remember that Jesus is always with us, especially when we're going through hard times. Ty reminded us all to trust God, and know that Jesus can calm the storms in our lives. Many of us then attended Mass together, sitting up front together. Mass was followed by a dinner of baked ziti, and we enjoyed sharing a meal together. VBS+ was a huge hit! Any parish that has VBS could easily add on a VBS+ evening or weekend afternoon, welcoming those with disabilities, making sure they know they belong and have valued gifts to share within the Body of Christ.