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For Immediate Release:

Panther Valley Ecumenical Church Sunday School Gets User Friendly

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By Tanya Drobness
Star-Ledger Staff

Modern methods bring dramatic rise in enrollment

Ten-year old Ethan Schaars of Byram remembers what Sunday School at Panther Valley Ecumenical Church was like last year, when he sat with his head on the table and stared wearily at his teacher who lectured on stories from the Bible.

"I just sat and daydreamed. The classes were crowded and everybody was getting bored," Ethan said.

Bored students and teachers, as well as a decline in attendance and Bible literacy, were just a few of the concerns that had church leaders at the Allamuchy-based ministry worried. Ethan wasn't the only one who wanted out of the traditional Sunday School curriculum of stapled worksheets and Popsicle-stick crafts.

"If we're not having fun, we're not doing it right, and over the years we knew we needed a fresh approach," said the Rev. Keith Jones of Panther Valley Ecumenical Church.

After exploring the programs that other Presbyterian churches employed, they decided to try a new way of conducting Sunday School and implemented the Workshop Rotation Model last September. The ministry is the only church in Warren County that uses this model.

Now Ethan can't wait for Sunday to come. "They changed it so that we can use computers, do plays and have more fun with what we learn from the Bible," Ethan said.

The Workshop Rotation Model was first developed in the early 1990s by several Presbyterian churches in Chicago that sought to solve Sunday School problems such as boring curricula, classrooms and teaching methods.

"This immediately boosted the learning experience of Sunday School. The Church never had so many children in the program before and they are more excited about coming to church," said Sunday School Superintendent Maureen Bloom.

According to Jones, the model has been implemented in several Christian education programs in many denominations throughout the country since it began.

The creative and "kid-friendly" workshops have been attracting more families and kids to classes that keep them wide awake with lessons instead of traditional preaching and story telling.

"The size of the Sunday School almost doubled in the last three months. Almost 60 people signed up in September," said Jones. He added that the membership before the program had remained stagnant for several years.

Instead of allowing the same teacher to conduct class for the entire year, one more Bible story is studied for five weeks, with a different teacher each week.

"This is a spiritual immersion that is kid-friendly, and it has created solutions and different opportunities for everyone," said program coordinator Gail Werner.

Over the five-week session, the workshops may include baking unleavened bread while talking about the Exodus from Egypt, building crafts while discussing Noah's Ark, writing songs and using computer labs.

And because each workshop is different, kids don't get bored.

"Werner was hired program coordinator at Panther Valley last June and immediately implemented the Workshop Rotation Model for the fall session.

"I went there with the intention of implementing this program, and the church leaders were open to the vision. So I went to several workshops in other Presbyterian churches to learn more about it," Werner said.

As a result of the program, church membership has also increased significantly, according to Jones. "What we've seen is that there is more church attendance and more young families finding out about the program and coming out, and that's a healthy sign." Jones said.

"If we've got something that other churches can use, then Amen."

The church currently has 250 members and serves four denominations -Episcopal, United Methodist, United Church of Christ and the 'Presbyterian Church, USA.

It was founded in 1969 as an experiment by the New Jersey Council of Churches to bring more than one denomination together.

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