

Romans 12

We who are many are one body in Christ.

Experience the Rock: Loving God and Loving Neighbor

Produced by the Discipleship Ministries of The United Methodist Church to communicate effective principles and practices demonstrated by congregations that are actively making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

These congregations are marked by:

- Clarity around the mission and vision of the congregation.
- Practice of spiritual disciplines, both corporately and individually.
- Nurture in growth in discipleship through mutual support and accountability.
- Cultivation of intentional and mutual relationships with the most vulnerable—the poor, children, the imprisoned, the powerless.
- Consistent concern for inviting people into relationship with Jesus Christ, combined with wise practices for initiating them into the body of Christ.
- Connectional relationships that facilitate participation in God's mission of global transformation.
- Shared clergy and lay leadership.

Every summer, fifth and sixth graders at First United Methodist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, have an opportunity to *Experience the Rock*.

Seeking ways to provide meaningful opportunities for children to experience and respond to their community, First United Methodist Church created a five-day summer camp that invites children to experience their hometown through five different lenses.

The idea for this ministry grew out of conversations with the children at FUMC. Through these conversations, the children revealed how little they felt they had in common with their neighbors. Hearing a child say, "I've never ridden a bus.... Only hobos do that..." sparked the idea for a ministry that would challenge these types of stereotypes, expand the children's understanding and awareness, and open their eyes to the reality of their neighbors and classmates. By providing opportunities that might not be a regular occurrence in the children's lives, such as taking public transportation, *Experience the Rock* attempts to break down stereotypes, helping participants understand that they have classmates and neighbors who live these realities every day. What did the children learn from riding a public bus? "These people are just like we are."

Hoping to enrich conversation and understanding, the Rev. Donna Hankins-Hull, the associate pastor, designed this ministry in response to her learnings from the children in her congregation. She realized the importance of "challenging what the children believe." *Experience the Rock* offers five perspectives on Little Rock. There is one perspective for each day of the event. Children participate in field trips and activities designed to help them experience their city as a tourist, a person living on the margins, a differently-abled person, a young child, and a millionaire. *Experience the Rock* is a fun and interactive way for children to learn about the community where they live. One year, the group went shopping with a limited budget. They had to design a menu based on their allotted funds. Little did they know that the next day they would prepare and share a meal based on what they had bought. Conversation over the table brought lots of reflection on the quality, taste, and amount of food the meal provided. Another year, children were invited to *Experience the Rock* as differently-abled people who used crutches. Although walking on crutches at the start of the experience might have been fun, it quickly became tiring and burdensome. "It was not fun or cool after having to do it all day."

Experience the Rock is a reality check. It provides an opportunity for children to develop empathy and understanding for their neighbors. The hope is that these experiences will inform the children's and adult's actions, calling attention to how they see others and how they treat their neighbors.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does your congregation build relationships with its neighbors? How does your congregation experience its neighborhood and community?
2. How does your congregation provide opportunities to develop and practice empathy?
3. What would a ministry such as *Experience the Rock* look like in your context?

Tanya Eustace is Director of Children and Intergenerational Ministries at Discipleship Ministries. She may be reached at teustace@umcdiscipleship.org.

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