

Spiritual growth offered through arts academy

Marry Garrigan Journal Staff



Thomas Vozzella thinks of it as the worship arts version of building a baseball diamond in an Iowa cornfield.

“Build it, and they will come,” Vozzella said, referring to the Fine and Performing Arts Academy that First Presbyterian Church in Rapid City recently launched on a shoestring budget as part of its children and youth ministry.

Tom Vozzella, right, the director of Worship Arts at the First Presbyterian Church, asks students about whole notes, half notes and quarter notes on Wednesday, Sept. 22, at the church.

The youth academy program — with its art, vocal music, drama and guitar lessons for kids 4 years through 12th grade — is something that is not being offered at any other church in town, said the new director of worship arts at First Presbyterian.

The concept behind it is to offer a place that fosters artistic and spiritual growth by developing the mind, body and soul of kids through art, drama and music. In other words, Vozzella said, performing a song from “The Prince of Egypt” or acting a scene from “The Theology of Forrest Gump” can be a lesson in faith, too.

“Faith lessons come about from the experience,” he said. “There are things to be taught in the music.”



Ainslee Hemmen, right, plays the guitar on Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010, at the First Presbyterian Church during guitar lessons.

Less than a month old, the academy offers Wednesday after-school lessons for two age groups. Kindergartners through second-graders can take art and vocal music from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Children in grades three through five have three lessons: vocal music at 4 p.m., drama at 4:30 p.m. and guitar lessons at 5 p.m.

On Sunday, from 4 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., youths in grades six through 12 rehearse for the music and drama touring group, E Troupe.

There is a small weekly participation fee for guitar lessons and a \$1 weekly fee for art supplies for the youngest students. Each section is limited to 20 students. There’s open enrollment for the entire first semester, but next year’s academy program will have a spring enrollment period.

Kids from the church, and from outside it, are responding to what the academy offers, Vozzella said. The third- through fifth-grade section nearly doubled in size between the first and second weeks — growing from four participants to seven.

One of those participants is Ainslee Hemmen, 8, who loves anything musical, said her mother, the Rev. Diane Janssen Hemmen.

“I think she was born singing,” she said.

Ainslee is thrilled with the group guitar lessons, which are taught by Chris Johnson on child-sized guitars. Her mom is pleased by the program's creative benefits, as well as its price. For the cost of a fast-food child's meal, Ainslee gets a weekly lesson, including guitar rental.

"I think First Pres really has seen a gap here in Rapid City and they're trying, very intentionally, to meet a need here," Janssen Hemmen said. "We don't have enough exposure to the arts — adults or children."

She's a Presbyterian minister who pastors the Hermosa United Church of Christ, a small congregation that, like so many churches, is forced by resources to focus on the essentials of children's ministry — Sunday school and helping kids learn the stories of their faith.

But historically, churches have been places of artistic learning and expression, she said.

"If we're created in God's image ... then something about us needs to stay in touch with that creative part of ourselves if we're going to love God," she said.

If Ainslee and her brother, Eli, 6, learn to tap into their creativity as children, it will help them become better people — whether they become engineers, lawyers or artists, she said.



Tom Vozzella, right, the director of worship arts at the First Presbyterian Church, teaches students the notes of the G clef on Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010, at the church.

When he came to First Presbyterian in March, Vozzella brought the vision of a performing arts academy with him. At his most recent post as worship arts director at First Methodist Church in Midland, Texas, Vozzella developed a similar academy that has been a successful educational outreach for that church. He and his wife, Cathy, are the parents of Ashley, 8, an academy student.

"In Midland, I got a \$1 million grant to do this. Here, I'm doing it with basically no money," Vozzella said.

With the help of a small church staff and numerous volunteers, the First Presbyterian academy has ambitious plans for the future — including a drama troupe that is already planning a 10-day trip next summer that will take them to performances in churches, vacation Bible schools and nursing homes across the northwestern U.S. and Canada. The drama group will employ "lifestyle evangelism" instead of overt proselytizing in its religious message, Vozzella said.

For more information or to register, contact Vozzella at tvozzella_fpc@rushmore.com or 343-6171. Scholarships are available.