



Youth group plans for mission trip to Panama next year

By **NANCY SUNDSTROM**
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Like many other area youth groups, the teens from Trinity Lutheran Church in Traverse City serve their community as part of their mission and as a testament to their religious faith. In 2003, though, they'll be undertaking their biggest effort yet when a group of 35 youth and adult chaperones travel to the country of Panama. Their focus will be to teach English as a second language at mission stations near Balboa, using the Bible as a basic textbook because the highly universal nature of its message is cross-cultural and easily understood.

It's a very different undertaking from doing yard work for shut-ins, passing out free bottles of water during National Cherry Festival parades or serving dinners for their church between Advent or Lenten services. Still, the challenge is invigorating and motivating, say both kids and adults who will be involved.

"The traditional youth model limits the young to recreational activities and labor intensive service that neither fosters growth or challenges them to put their faith into action," said Robert Zagore, Trinity's Senior Pastor. "With this trip, the kids are not only going to be highly challenged, but are going to be given experiences that are unique, important and have the opportunity to be life-changing.

"It will also help them to understand a little more of the world the Lord has placed them into," Zagore continued. "As Christians in the United States, we take our high standard of living, education, access to resources and even access to church for granted. It is difficult to come back from a mission station like this without having that narrow world-view broadened."

The proposal for a mission trip somewhere outside of the United States came up during a CORP meeting, which is a group of kids who are interested in a more in depth approach to their faith and understanding their faith than the normal youth offerings. After enthusiastic response to the idea, Zagore explored several possibilities, including house construction and street ministry in Mexico, working in an agricultural mission station in Venezuela, and teaching English in Panama, which proved to be the overwhelming favorite.

"There is a general sentiment among the kids that they want to do things that are a genuine expression of their

faith. This trip gives them that chance," explained Zagore. "It's important for Christians of all ages to understand the obligation they have to use the gifts God has given them in the Lord's service. The best way for any Christian to grow in their faith is to take it seriously and get involved with it. Christianity is the most addictive thing on the planet. The more you understand it, the more you participate in it, the more you live it, the greater the joy you receive."

At present, the list of youth registered includes Lindsay Arnot, Katie Bedard, Alli Boyer, Clara Boyer, Jordan Byington, Sarah Daniels, Heather Dunn, Megan Davenport, Rachel Davenport, Amanda Evans, Madison Ford, Max Johnson, Matthew Moll, Phillip Moll, Diego Silva,

Andrew Stier, Elissa Stier, Emily Stier and Chris Zagore.

Over the next year, they have committed themselves to monthly training events and to homework that will help them prepare for the trip. Everyone on the trip will have specific areas of responsibility, in addition to the general work of the team. The cost of the trip will be around \$1,500 per person, so a great deal of the effort will be expended to raise money to cover costs.

Zagore says the group will have a concrete example of what the mission can mean built into this trip.

In addition to the teens from Traverse City who are making the trip, Diego Silva, an exchange student from Colombia, plans to go along. It will be the last thing he does with his American church

family before going back to Colombia to finish his education.

Silva is hoping that the team's work in Panama will allow him to make Christian contacts that can help with his struggling church in neighboring Colombia. A 30-year-old civil war and economic strife have made life in Colombia difficult and has harmed the church's work as well.

"I have been very involved with the church here in the Traverse City and hope I will be able to make meaningful contacts with fellow Lutherans in Panama that will benefit congregations and mission in Colombia," said Silva.

Zagore added that the other team members will have a vested interest built into that work, as well. Depending on

it could very well be that the next international trip will be to help Silva in his church in Colombia. Trinity's goal is to have a mission team every year. Jan Johnson is a Trinity Youth Board member and parent of Max, 14, who plans to go on the Panama trip.

"Everyone involved with this has been so excited so far, and I have no doubt that after it's over, this will be a life-changing experience," said Johnson. "Pastor Zagore's theory, and I say 'ditto,' is that this will enlighten them to the many privileges they have in this country, and will also deepen their faith and trust in the Lord for the rest of their lives. I don't see how this couldn't be of benefit to everyone."

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.



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