

## Black Mountain Presbyterian Church Youth Ministry 1968-2018

Whether it was the proximity to Montreat Conference Center or the area where so many former missionaries retired, from its beginning, youth ministry and mission have worked hand in hand through the years and have been a constant priority for Black Mountain Presbyterian. During the early years of the church, lay people were chosen, and often paid, to work with the youth alongside dedicated volunteers. Some of these leaders were paid just for the summer and later a part-time youth worker was hired. Some of the volunteers were folks who came back after college and worked with their home church youth. Mike Begley worked during this time in the early 70's, and then came back later in the early 1990's to work with youth again. Kent Patton has worked almost continuously since 1978 with his home church youth being first with senior highs and then in later years moving into middle school youth, loving and relating to them during their particularly awkward and challenging times.

Perhaps because we were few in children for so many years, the congregation is always so excited to welcome new families and children and youth into the congregation. In researching this history of Black Mountain Presbyterian Youth Ministry the reoccurring theme throughout has been the welcoming of children and youth, engaging them in Bible study, mission, service, and participating in strengthening their growth in discipleship for Christ's church within the world. It is an amazing story for one little church in Black Mountain, North Carolina.

**1968-1980** Youth ministry was considered a high priority and although the group was small with youth from the congregation, during this time the children from the Black Mountain Home for Children, formerly known as the Presbyterian Home for Children, were coming to Sunday School and Church at Black Mountain Presbyterian. These youth were often a majority of the children and youth in Sunday school and youth group. The children from the Home left in 1970 to attend the Swannanoa First Presbyterian Church. Black Mountain Presbyterian was engaged in a building campaign and space was limited for Sunday school and youth activities.

One former youth group member remembers youth directors who were more conservative, very scripture oriented, with a “memorize this and you won’t go wrong approach.” The youth group had a paid couple to lead them and during this time the numbers ebbed and flowed based on the fun factor. She does recall that even with a playful group, they gained a solid scriptural foundation. This person remembers a large senior high group going on retreats and being active in the Presbytery’s youth council. She does not recall the youth having as much of an emphasis on mission during this time as prior and later groups when she returned in the 1990’s to work with youth. On Sunday evenings a Bible study was held for the youth lead by different youth leaders and then afterwards there was a time for recreation and games. Studying scriptures and making application to life was the model for youth ministry during this time. Dr. Shelor, pastor from 1966-1988, considered youth ministry important and youth were included in Youth Sundays or by sharing their Sunday school studies with the congregation. Because of the number of retired missionaries and a churchwide passion for mission, youth attended the Gatlinburg, Tennessee, Mission Conference for several years. This conference was for high school and college students to be introduced to foreign mission work in the former PCUS church. Students and advisors attended. The Black Mountain Presbyterian youth were also active in attending Presbytery weekend long events with some of our youth being active in the leadership of these events. Dr. Shelor took a personal interest in each young person, and as he was very involved in community outreach, he wanted this for our youth as well. During this time because of the importance placed by the church on the youth, a youth pastor, Dan McLean was hired, and he later went on to seminary from this position.

**1980-1990** By the mid 1980’s the church was growing and the session was able to hire a full time Director of Christian Education in Martha Sherrod. Her responsibilities included coordinator of children, youth, and adult educational activities. During this time the church and many of our older children participated in the Irish Children’s program, a time for Protestant and Catholic Irish children to come to the US to live together with families for 6 weeks in a peaceful setting. This program lasted for several years and gave our church an opportunity to be involved in critical world affairs, making a difference in the lives of these 12

children each summer. Martha also began Kid's Club, a forerunner of Logos, for our elementary children. It was through Martha's work that the connections between the Weekday preschool, the elementary children's program, and the youth ministry began to build a more comprehensive program for children from birth through senior highs. Children were coming to Sunday school and worship and these children would grow our middle school and senior high programs in the future. Youth participated in the Crop Walk, Halloween parties for preschool and elementary children, intergenerational Easter vigils where some even tried liturgical dance, as well as intergenerational Vacation Bible Schools. When Martha left in 1991, a hole was felt in our elementary school ministry, not to be filled until 2000 when Ginny Soll arrived to begin the Logos program.

In 1989 John McCall became pastor and he was this energetic, young, passionate about youth ministry and mission young man who drew people to him because he really communicated the Gospel in a serious, yet meaningful manner and he was fun. Under John's leadership with Martha and later with Libby Inman mission trips and both local and international missions became more prominent. Because of John's leadership, this was a strong time in the life of our church. New members were joining, the weekday school was doubled in size through the building program, and new families were becoming involved with all aspects of church life. Youth ministry was gaining attention within the church leadership and community through the relevancy of its programming. This was the time when we were moving from study, recreation, and some Presbytery involvement to mission trips and the youth being exposed beyond our small town and seeing God's great world and needs within the world.

**1990-2000** In the mid 90's the children from the Home for Children returned to worshipping at Black Mountain Presbyterian. This was both a blessing and a challenge as to how to incorporate them into the life of the church. Some families were hesitant about having their children mixing and mingling with children and youth from the Home, particularly those who had challenging behaviors. The times had changed and so had the acting out of children and youth. Once again the church persevered, determined to make it work, to be Church to the Home kids as well as the member's kids. This was a time of highly

active programming with lots of service and trips and conferences. By 1993 the church had begun to participate in the Montreat Youth Conferences along with the mission trips to Washington, DC, Government Street Church in Mobile, Alabama, and other areas where physical labor and help was needed. For our Black Mountain youth these trips were often a first time look at the real poverty and need of people in larger areas. Black Mountain's poverty and homelessness was less visible and our Black Mountain youth were noticeably moved as one young person upon seeing a homeless man, sobbed, "Its not fair there are 4 bedrooms at my house and 2 aren't even used and that guy doesn't have a place to live." This young man went on to become a missionary in Africa where he is preaching and teaching the Gospel within his local village. Another young person talked at home about how what he was seeing was so hard and life changing, and he wasn't sure what to do about it, but he knew he wasn't going to be the same. He later went on to seminary and is pastoring a large church in the PCUSA which is heavily mission oriented.

John had come to the church from Florida and knew of the Duval Home for Children and Adults with severe mental challenges, so one or two of our mission trips involved youth and adults going to Duval and working with the residents. There were also trips to Mexico at small villages near the border. This was the beginning of international youth mission trips in addition to home mission. The mid 90's was a turning point in youth ministry for our church in that numbers grew, but both lay and professional leadership strengthened the message and service of what youth could be learning and doing. Strong lay leadership in Bob Tuttle, Lynn Turnage, Clay and Cindy Hile, Mike and Ellen Begley, and Karen and Dan Davis provided both organization and programming and the potato lunches were begun. These were fund raisers, but also youth and families were expected to participate both in washing potatoes and cooking and serving the meal. The congregation came for lunch and delightful conversations happened around the tables with youth serving and getting to know church members. From baked potato lunches came money to fund the local and international trips and conferences in Montreat and Massanetta. Family engagement was a high priority as our youth ministry grew and more adults were needed to provide transportation and equipping for these young people to engage in ministry.

By the time John left in 1996, the senior highs had solidified into a working group, strong in mission, fellowship, service, and worship. In addition to Sunday school the youth lead Youth Sundays and had youth fellowship as well as local service projects with Habitat and Manna Foodbank. Youth had strong leadership in Wave and Thea Oglesby, Bobbi White, Smith and Gene Wilson, and Tommy and Ed Hay. The building, known as the Church House, was purchased and youth had their own space for Sundays. Confirmation classes were strengthened by pairing, mostly an 8<sup>th</sup> grade youth with an adult, and as with most things, some of these were powerful relationships that continued for many years. One former youth stated, "I remember very little about concrete programs, especially Sunday nights, but it was about the people and the relationships." Mike Begley would drive the church van to away football games, so kids could go and this person stated, "that was an amazing adult commitment for all those hours on a Friday night." Other adults invited youth to play basketball, watch tournaments on tv at their homes. Adults took time to spend with youth, people who had strong faith outside the youth's own parents that could model and discuss important topics with the youth both individually and in groups. "It was about people who cared for you, a care that remains." This young person along with 6 other young people raised in the church went on to attend a PCUSA seminary and are serving the Church today. Also, as a way to continue to learn about the larger church, a youth from the church was asked to be on the Triennium planning team and thus began a representation each year at Triennium from our youth. Since the mid '90's Black Mountain Presbyterian has had youth leadership and adult leadership on Triennium planning teams, Montreat planning teams, and Massanetta planning teams. Our church has become known for its strong leadership development and involvement in the larger Church. The adult leadership was strong, developed by the pastors and educators, and this leadership gave willingly to the youth in so many ways building relationships and programmatic work as our youth benefited.

Frank Boyd was hired in the mid 90's to coordinate the youth group. He continued to grow the numbers but added more programing along with conferences for both age groups and mission trips. A youth and parent Sexuality Retreat was begun for Middle school youth and their families. This continues even until today. Frank was caring, not a flamboyant and loud youth director, but kind and quietly related to the youth. The challenges with the Home kids continued

but they participated with programming when they were able. Paul Scouten, a youth advisor began participating in volunteer activities at the Children's Home. This provided a positive relational connection for the youth. A youth, during this time states, "The mission trips over Spring Break were highlights every year. Such a great time for the whole group to bond and have such a challenging and growing experience." She remembers trips to Duval, Florida, Mexican border towns, ASP in Kentucky, and Washington, DC. At this time Black Mountain students all attended the same high school, so spring break was a good time to go and then have conferences for the summer. As the years continued, that changed in the mid 2000's when more schools and choices became a part of this community. Service trips moved to the summer because different schools had breaks at different times.

Lynn Webber was a part time youth educator for a short time and she continued the mission emphasis as she had been a Young Adult Volunteer in mission in the Philippines. It was because of her influence that one of our youth grew up to graduate college and serve in the Philippines also as a YAV. Lynn was quiet and more intentional in her relationships, being a reflective and thoughtful listener to all. Once again, the strength of the covenant partner relationships during confirmation was mentioned as such a special friendship building time along with their good listening skills to the youth.

During John McCall's tenure as pastor, our church formed a covenant partnership with Eben-Ezer, our sister church in Guatemala. This relationship continues to this day with our church sending groups of youth and adults down to Guatemala to be with families, to learn of their church work, and to share in worship and play and study. Through the years youth and children in Guatemala have been pen pals with youth from BMPC, folks have provided scholarships for Guatemalan children to attend school, and members of the congregation have visited in Black Mountain. The first trips began in 1995 and are continuing with youth and adults going this summer in 2018. Once again youth and adults are engaged in doing important learning and working together in partnership with our brothers and sisters in Guatemala.

1998 Bob Ratchford was called to be Pastor and Head of staff and with his coming new staff began to arrive. We were a growing church and there was much work to be done. As our youth were becoming more involved youth representatives were placed on committees, especially Pastor and Associate Pastor and Educator committees, and a youth elder was elected to serve a one year term on the session, thereby giving youth a voice in the leadership of our church.

**2000-2010** With the arrival of Bob Ratchford, new staff were brought Black Mountain Presbyterian. Ginny Soll was hired as Christian Educator for children and youth and she immediately began a strong Logos program that incorporated worship, music, study, and fellowship. Some middle school youth participated as helpers and so they benefitted also. Bob, as pastor, and his wife Susan were active weekly in this elementary program building relationships with children and their families. Once again, we had a comprehensive program of Christian education from birth through senior high school and families appreciated and engaged with these programs.

After much study and conversation, a covenant was written connecting the Children's Home with Black Mountain Presbyterian Church and Paul Scouten was hired to be the Covenant Coordinator, working with the Home kids and integrating them more into the life and worship and study of our church. From this partnership in January 2003, the church was awarded the Katherine Hawes Award for Effective Youth Ministry by the denomination. Our eighth grade confirmation class continued to be strong with faithful covenant partners guiding youth through their understanding of their faith journey and what it means to be confirmed within the Presbyterian church.

In 2005 there were administrative changes at the Home for Children, so their students no longer attended the Black Mountain Presbyterian Church. But youth ministry was strong, mission trips continued and a new model for weekly youth ministry was introduced in 2004 called Synago. Synago is a youth lead Bible study in homes of various church members. This was a strong program in the beginning giving rise to youth leadership in group Bible studies. Leadership continued to try and balance mission, service, study, and fellowship, providing our youth with a balanced and varied youth ministry program. Local mission work included Feed A

Family at Thanksgiving, Manna Food Bank, Veteran's Restoration Quarters, and caroling at a local retirement center. Mission trips included Washington DC, Harvest of Hope, Firstshine, Appalachian Service project, Katrina Hurricane relief in Louisiana and Floyd Hurricane Relief in Rocky Mount, NC. By this time the mission groups were often becoming more intergenerational allowing youth and adults to build deeper relationships as well as provide service for families.

Conferences continued each summer with middle schoolers going to Massanetta and senior highs attending Montreat Youth conference. Also, intergenerational events were held at Camp Grier as well as presbytery events for youth. During the mid 2000's there were quite a few staff changes, but mission trips continued. These mission experiences were an established part of a church who believe strongly in teaching young people the meaning of serving others. No matter who the staff members were during these transitional times, mission trips continued and services of worship and Youth Sundays were times to reflect on the meaning of these awe inspiring trips.

Youth Sunday was not the only time children and youth participated in worship leadership. Children and youth were liturgists, readers, actors in skits, ushers and musicians in our 2 worship services. The Logos children learned about worship and ways they could participate and this enabled them to grow in confidence and leadership giving them a chance for further leadership in middle school and senior high youth. This intergenerational leadership within worship is considered the "norm" today instead of something special seen only occasionally.

Shannon Kirschner served as pastor from 2008-2014 providing her gifts of relationship and support and undergirding the ministries that were so important. As a parent of youth, she could engage with teenagers and families making connections with them on Sundays as well as through the week.

With the arrival of Mike Barker, a more contemporary early worship service began, and Mike included interested youth in singing with the Prophets of Praise band.

**2010-2018** After Bob Ratchford left to serve a church in Richmond, Shannon Kirschner was called to Black Mountain Presbyterian. While searching for an



associate pastor, Dave Roberts was hired as interim youth director. Berry French was called as Associate Pastor in 2011 with a strong emphasis in youth ministry. He, along with strong volunteers Kent Patton and Beth and Bruce Gunn, built upon our program both in content and numbers with his energetic and exuberant personality bringing in more youth and families. Youth continued to have a balanced program during Berry's tenure with worship, study, fellowship, and service. Berry would incorporate Beth and Bruce Gunn to assist in leading campouts, biking trips, caving excursions, beach retreats to plan for youth Sunday, and worshipping at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. Beth and Bruce brought organizational and long time recreational skills that could help build a closer community among the youth and their place within the church. These experiences and the group building gave our young people an opportunity to appreciate more clearly how people of God love and serve one another and gave feet to their faith. These experiences were reflected upon during our incredibly powerful youth Sundays providing the congregation an opportunity to see young people in their growing leadership roles. As the youth lead worship, they let the church know of their desire to be more included and for more contemporary music. They also spoke of the life changing experiences they had on mission trips and attending conferences and ways they felt comfortable within the group. Because of the strong adult advisor leadership, the relational nature of youth ministry was deepening and the depth of time together was reflected by the youth as very important to them in their faith journey. They continued to remind us of their need to see and value the relevancy of the Gospel.

Bruce and Beth Gunn brought years of recreational experience and outdoor camping to the group which meshed with Berry's active style of ministry. When Berry left in 2017, Bruce and Beth continued with other volunteers to provide a strong program of youth ministry and Chandler Guess was hired to be a part time youth ministry coordinator. With the strong volunteer leadership she inherited, Chandler has been able to continue and enrich our youth ministry and seek to equip our adults with skills and ways to authentically involve more youth and their families in our programming.

An Associate Pastor Search Committee has been formed and the intent is that person will have strong skills in Christian Education and Youth ministry overseeing part time staff who will continue and develop our youth ministry in ways that welcomes all young people and provides a place where they are included and affirmed within the life and ministry of our church. Black Mountain Presbyterian will continue to develop new ways for youth to learn about discipleship, learning ways their lives can be lived out authentically each day in all settings. Black Mountain Presbyterian has been richly blessed with faithful leaders, both ordained and lay, and our children and youth have been guided in their faith journey. Thanks be to God.