

PA Family Holiday to Gartmore – October 2016

On the final night of the Priority Areas Holiday Week (17th - 20th October 2017), two seven year olds swapped addresses with an earnest agreement to keep in touch. Three days before they had been strangers, but their friendship had been formed over a mutual love of eight legged creatures and a mutual dislike of being limited to one roll with their lunchtime soup. Although four days may sound like a short amount of time, the experiences shared in that period were intense and worthy of much higher importance than their span suggests.

90 participants, from 24 families, hailing from Aberdeen, Glasgow, Stirling and Ayrshire, gathered for the holiday, entitled 'Rest, Relax and Renew', at Gartmore House, near Aberfoyle. Ministers in Priority Area congregations were asked to suggest families who were particularly in need of a break to join the holiday. For months before the event, Lynn MacLellan, along with her team at the Priority Area Office communicated with the families to ensure the smooth running of the week, managing expectations and ensuring any additional needs were catered for.

Monday was the arrival day, and with 90 participants, the rest and relaxation could not really begin until 90 suitcases were delivered to the right rooms, but an able band of volunteers, led by Neil Young, Youth Team Leader at St Paul's, Provanmill, endeavoured to ensure that all participants were able to have a break and enjoy some much needed time off.

While the mornings were filled with activities for children in their age groups, adults were free to enjoy the autumnal surroundings in the extensive gardens at Gartmore, indulge their creative sides with art workshops run by Jo Love, and relax while nail painting was provided by a local beauty salon.

Lining up for meals provided by Gartmore House, reminded many of us of school canteen days, although with far better food. We shared our meals around long tables and as the week went on, the children were often found at the opposite end of the room from their own families, enjoying the experience of eating with their new found friends. The break from cooking and clearing up was a very welcome element of the week for all the families.

During the afternoons and evenings, the family activities ranged from a trip on the Walter Scott, and bouncing on giant pillows at Briarlands Farm, to building towers with spaghetti and marshmallows and a visit from an Animal Man, indulging the seven year olds in their love of eight legged insects, and reminding some of the adults of their dislikes of the more wriggly creatures. By the time that the third night's concert came around, relationships had been built up to the point that we were inundated with acts as everyone felt safe to stand up and perform. There was much laughter, plenty of cheering, and one or two tears shed that night for some beautiful and touching performances.

A trip to Blair Drummond Safari Park rounded off the holiday, although everyone wished that it could have lasted longer. We collected the evaluations from all participants and several themes ran through them. The most important immediate effect was a feeling of happiness at having felt like part of a community for the holiday. The entertainment provided for the children benefitted both them, and the parents/grandparents, as some much needed quiet time off was enjoyed. For some, life can be isolating and the friendly company that the week provided was a welcome change.

Worship was the other highly regarded element of the week. Jo Love, of the Iona Community, led a slot each evening, with colourful, playful settings, engaging both the children and adults in surprising and moving worship. Many mentioned how the worship had given them renewed strength to go back to their normal lives.

Memories aren't filled with the regular everyday trips to school and the shops. They are filled with the events that make stories that we can go back to in our minds when we feel the need to take

ourselves away from the everyday grind. The Gartmore week was full of these story making events, and the memories will live on for all of us, for many years to come.

For the wider church, one of the comments which stuck with us as volunteers was how the participants really appreciated that the week **wasn't** provided for them by one or two rich people, but by the church as a whole deciding that it was an important event to provide. The church is one body, but many parts, and much appreciation was shown by those who benefitted from the week, for the rest of the body of the church, all over Scotland, who allowed this holiday to take place.

Libby Young