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Ozark Mission Project Finds Success in Online-Only Camp

OMP Connect brings campers together via Zoom

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The coronavirus pandemic has upended not only our churches but our extension ministries as well. Some of the most popular summer camps for youth and young adults are the Ozark Mission Project camps, where youth from all across the Conference can come together to physically serve their communities with renovation and building projects while learning about Scripture.

Unfortunately, because of the risk that serving in-person poses to the people OMP assists, this year's camps were canceled in an effort to protect everyone from spreading COVID-19.

But that didn't stop OMP from remaining connected despite the restrictions on meeting in-person.

OMP Connect is the organization's solution to social distancing in summer 2020.

"In April, our board voted to suspend in-person summer camps due to COVID-19," said Bailey Faulkner, director of Ozark Mission Project. "Our number one priority is to keep our neighbors and our campus safe and following the guidelines. And there was no way we would be able to have in-person camp and be safe this summer."

Faulkner said that while she and her team at OMP were racking their brains trying to come up with a way to still have something for youth this summer, Faulkner's mother came up with a solution.

"My mother has COPD so she isn't able to get out during the pandemic. But she said 'well, you know OMP is really about building relationships, and what better time to do that than with neighbors that are homebound?'"

After forming a committee of youth pastors and volunteers, OMP decided to launch OMP Connect for the 2020 summer.

OMP Connect is for 4th – 12th graders and is all of the fun of an OMP camp, but campers meet at home on their computer rather than at a church.

"We try to incorporate everything that you would normally have at an OMP camp. All the campers 'arrive' via an online platform, Zoom, and we have music playing and people welcoming them as they come in, just like our regular camps."

They then move into morning announcements and then a daily scripture reading. Afterward, campers move into family groups which consist of two adult leaders and five to six kids.

In the groups, they play games and have a discussion on the daily scripture.

One of the aspects of camp that is harder to reproduce on a virtual platform is the service activities. Normally during camp, OMP campers will do service projects for a resident of the community, which they call "neighbors," such as repainting a house or building a wheelchair ramp. However, despite the limitations of an online camp, OMP has found a way to incorporate "Tool Time" into the camp as well.

"We show a Tool Time video, which shows different things like how to use a power tool and things like that. This year, we are focusing on activities that they can do at home with their families, like showing them how to build and maintain a raised-bed garden in their yard," Faulkner said.

Faulkner said that she's found that campers have the same experience on the virtual platform as they do at in-person camps.

“You know, everyone is a little shy and awkward at the beginning of the week, but by Thursday, it’s the cutest. It’s like the kids don’t want to hang up at the end of the day.”



Jules Anderson, Student and Adult Ministries Director at Sequoyah UMC in Fayetteville, said that she’s seen lots of growth and joy in kids who’ve attended OMP Connect.

“The most amazing thing to me about this week of OMP Connect is that despite the obstacles of an online program, Ozark Mission Project has still managed to find a way to serve neighbors in just the way that they needed.

“The hope in God that He could still move through a Zoom meeting and online worship was alive this week, and I know that I have walked away impacted by the power of the Holy Spirit to bring connection and unity through such a camp as this. The spirit is alive in our state through OMP Connect and I am thankful that I got to be a small part of this week,” Anderson said.

Dianne Cook, a neighbor who participated in OMP Connect this year, also had a memorable time with the camp.

"I'm impressed that so many younger youth are participating in OMP Connect. My favorite part about this camp has been getting to see faces, learning how to use Zoom, and getting to talk to this group of kids," she said.

Grace Beckham, a recent graduate of Mountain Home High School who will be attending Belmont University in the fall, shared that even though this year was different, many memories and learning experiences were made at OMP Connect.

"This year has been a whirlwind for everyone, and if we were to fix our eyes on the things of this current world, it would be so easy to see only chaos, on every side," Beckham said. "Being someone who considers Ozark Mission Project her favorite 'place' on earth, I had to be very careful and prayerful to make sure that I was going into this non-traditional OMP experience with an open mind and a humble heart. Despite my heart's uncharacteristic hesitations, my experience through OMP Connect brought more encouragement, joy, and wisdom than I had ever dreamed possible.

"If I could pinpoint one lesson I learned, it would have to be this: we should never let our own comfort lead us to underestimate the unshakeable, unfathomable power of God. God showed up to me this week, and He proved to me that His transcendence is unrivaled. Nothing is impossible for Him."

OMP scheduled three weeks of OMP Connect this summer, June 8 -11, June 22 - 25, and the last week of camp, which will take place July 13 -16. The first week Faulkner said they had 65 campers, and the second week they had 75. Although these numbers are smaller than what they are used to, Faulkner sees it as a major success considering there were no other alternatives.

One of the biggest barriers that OMP had to overcome this year was the loss in revenue from not having in-person camp.

Faulkner said that when they realized they weren't going to be able to have camp, they made the decision to refund 100% of the money they received from registrations back to parents and churches.

"We returned a little over \$170,000 back to families and churches," Faulkner said.

What would have been a huge financial loss for OMP ending up being saved thanks to the generosity of the Methodist Foundation for Arkansas and other supporters of OMP.

"They made it possible for us to have OMP Connect as a completely free program to local churches and campers."

For those wanting to register for the last week of OMP Connect, there is still time to do so. Registration ends on July 6 and more information can be found at ozarkmissionproject.org.

For the future, Faulkner said they hope to be able to gather again in-person in summer 2021, but from now on, OMP Connect will be their “rain plan option.”

“This experience has made us realize that this camp is a huge need in our community. And right now, OMP is in a time of needing critical support. We are 100% funded by donations, and we need all the help we can get to continue doing this for another 35 years and beyond,” Faulkner said.

To donate to OMP, visit ozarkmissionproject.org/give and help financially support this vital ministry for years to come.

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