

What to Do and Where to Go

by Toni Papp

Living in the Northern Virginia/Washington, DC area provides a plethora of fun, easily accessible, inexpensive opportunities for youth ministry trips. All it takes is a little bit of planning time, some common sense, and a taste for adventure.

Throughout the year, there are numerous places that offer regular hours, like Laser Quest, bowling, and either ice or roller skating. However, check for special events or times, especially associated with a holiday. Skate Quest in Manassas offers Christian nights, with special rates, hours and they play Christian music. Laser Quest in Woodbridge will do private lock-ins and hours, late nights, and off-hours events.

Washington, DC is an obvious place to find free exhibits and events. Plan a scavenger hunt through several monuments and walk the Mall. You can end at Arlington Cemetery for the retiring of the colors or the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or at the Iwo Jima Memorial to have a bag dinner and watch the Marine Corps Silent Drill Team. The Navy, Army, and Marine Corps Bands sometime perform on the Capitol grounds for free concerts, and the Kennedy Center offers tours and some short free performances. To balance costly and free, spend time at the Air and Space Museum, but purchase tickets to the IMAX theater.

Washington, DC is also the home of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the Franciscan Monastery, the John Paul II Cultural Center, the Missionaries of Charity, the National Cathedral and many other wonderful places for a more spiritual visit. The National Cathedral offers tours and activities, including a scavenger hunt and gargoyle making. The John Paul II Cultural Center has changing exhibits, an activity center, and chapel, and the Franciscan Monastery boasts catacombs.

When planning a trip to DC, Metro is always helpful and fun for teens. Many younger teens have never travelled to DC or on Metro and this can be a treat. All day Metro cards are an excellent way to be mobile all over the city. Check with Metro on how to purchase a large number of cards because you are limited on how much can be charged at one time on a credit card and how many actual bills can be put in the machine per transaction.

Do not be afraid to try a bigger trip, like to Hershey Park in Pennsylvania. It just takes planning and forethought. Always ask for group rates, tax exempt status, and fee waivers for things like parking, processing or mailing. Theme parks are always a good draw for teens and can be family oriented if you include parents as drivers, or allow parents to bring other family members. Be clear about who is responsible for whom. For example, younger siblings may attend the trip if a parent does, but the parent is always responsible for that child. They may not join a group of teens, thinking the older sibling will watch them.

Check the current diocesan policy for allowing others to drive teens. There is a form needed from Risk Management for all drivers and compliance with all Child Protection policies is mandatory.

As a trip organizer, there is responsibility in thinking through the details, like figuring extra costs into what you charge participants (gas, parking, food, cost of the director attending, etc.), to providing clear directions to drivers, laying out expectations to participants, communicating to parents, setting the appropriate dress code, and being prepared with first aid kits, water, emergency forms, and contact information.

Drivers should be provided with a copy of the permission slip with medical information for each teen in their vehicle, as well as the cell phone number of people in charge, the name, phone number and address of the destination, and a briefing of expectations. This may include a reminder to heed speed limits, monitor conversations for appropriate content, wear seatbelts, and to keep music suitable.

Holy Family in Dale City has a summer program that takes teens on trips twice each week. The trips are planned well in advance, with a list provided to parents with dates, times, costs, and sign up deadlines. Many trips are popular and are repeated each summer, but new trips are introduced each year. Tubing on the Rappahannock River is great in the early summer, but toward the end of the season, the river levels are lower and the trip may not be as fun. A new trend toward businesses with giant inflatables and party rooms makes a place like House of Bounce or Kids in Motion a different kind of adventure and there is probably one close to each parish.

Ask teens about places they have been on school field trips, like team building and ropes courses. The local park authority is a great resource for hiking, canoeing, putt-putt golf, swimming, skateboarding and biking. There are some hidden gems in each county, like Hammill Mill pool in Prince William. This community pool is hidden in a neighborhood and is rarely crowded. A group discount is available, making an afternoon swim very affordable. The Holy Family group has combined this with service projects, making the day fun and productive.

A fantastic place to go is Great Country Farm in Bluemont, VA, where kids of every age (including the kids at heart) can play in mazes, carve pumpkins, pet a llama, watch pig races, play Cow Pie Putt-Putt, and much more. Berry, peach, pumpkin, broccoli and cauliflower patches allow picking opportunities year round. The Strawberry Festival, pumpkin chunking, and Glow Night are only a sampling of the special events offered by this family-owned and run farm.

Some tips that have been learned over the years of trip planning include always travelling with a full water cooler and cups in case of the unfortunate breakdown on the side of the road; remembering a car charger for your phone; double checking your reservation prior to the day of the trip; breaking large groups down into smaller, more manageable groups; making sure teens are always in groups of three at minimum; having check-in times during a long day, and letting them know how they can reach an adult chaperone at all times in case of an emergency or just because they have lost their group.

A successful trip is in attention to the details and the attitude presented by the leaders. Always include prayer in your trip, whether it is as you plan, before you leave, or at a stressful moment. A prayer, a smile, and a well thought out plan will go a long way to making your trip memorable and fun.

Toni Papp is the Director of Youth Ministry at Holy Family Catholic Church in Dale City, VA and has been there full time since 1999. She lives in Manassas with her husband and has one almost grown up son. Her Summer Friendship program gives her lots of experience in planning fun, local trips.