

TMCNet: Modesto church offers Bible school for special-needs children

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Jun 02, 2012 (The Modesto Bee - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- June is the traditional kickoff month for church-run vacation Bible schools, which usually include games, crafts, singing, skits, snacks and Bible stories.

But what if your child can't run in the relay games, can't see the crafts or hear the stories? What if large crowds of kids -- some VBS programs draw more than 500 of them -- overwhelm your mentally challenged child? Covenant Grove Church is offering a VBS program just for special-needs children, ages 5-12, from June 20-22. The free, three-day God's Special Kids Camp will be held from 2:30 to 4:45 p.m. at Modesto Covenant Church, 913 Floyd Ave. An orientation and open house will be held from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. June 19 so parents can meet the staff and so children can begin to bond with the volunteer buddies who will help them each day.

Covenant Grove ran a similar pilot program for six children two years ago. "At the time, we had a few kids in our church who had special needs. We had a heart for blessing them and their parents," said Jean Cheng Gorman, Covenant Grove's associate minister and a psychologist who specializes in work with children. "We also were hearing from families who had left churches because they were having a hard time keeping their kids in a regular classroom. And we had several people in our congregation with experience working with kids with special needs, so it was a natural connection." Covenant Grove, which meets in the Enochs High School multipurpose room on Sundays, decided to expand the program this year and hold it at its sister church, which will be in the midst of its own VBS program that week.

"We are really excited about doing (the special-needs program) this year," Gorman said. "We want to make sure the kids have a great time. Each camper will get a buddy -- a teenager or adult -- assigned to them." The camp is for any child with a developmental, physical or mental

disability, she said. "Children with autism, for example, cerebral palsy, children with ADHD. It's wide open, really -- anyone with a disability." "This is an outreach for the families," she added. "It's hard to have a family with special needs, and we want to support them. Our goal for the program is to communicate God's love to these very special children in a very personal way." Lydia Linares' son, Efren (called Effie), was part of the pilot program two years ago when he was 12. He has autism.

"He had gone to another really successful VBS in town, but he had been kind of overwhelmed by the number of kids. So this time, we chose this particular one because it was going to be a lot smaller and would have more individual attention," Linares said. "This gave Effie an opportunity to do fun things, like arts and crafts, but also it was just helpful to learn more about the Bible and those spiritual things. He was so happy every day when he came home and shared what he had learned. He really enjoyed it." Linares, who does not attend Covenant Grove, said it's sometimes hard to find activities for her son.

"It's nerve-wracking for me to let him spread his wings and let him be at a function without one of his parents there," she said. "But I felt very comfortable with the people who were running the program. They went above and beyond to make the experience a memorable one, and they're so caring. They were dedicated to making it special, and that's what it was." More information and registration forms can be found at Covenant Grove's Web site, www.covenantgrove.org. Or call the church at (209) 576-1559.

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