

RPTS Alum Feature

Rev. Michael Harvey, '91

-- by Beverly Simpson

(April, 2009) **Michael Harvey, RPTS '91**, (seen left in photo to the right at Seneca Hills Bible Camp) grew up in the Cleveland area. He first came to the Pittsburgh area after earning his undergraduate degree at Grove City College, where he also met his wife Elizabeth. When Elizabeth became a teacher in the Pine-Richland School District, (which she herself had attended), Mike decided it would be at RPTS (rather than Covenant in St. Louis) where he would study for his M.Div.



After graduating from RPTS in 1991, Mike served in a number of pastorates. First ministering at the Covenant of Grace PCA in Maryland as youth and family pastor until 1996, he then was church development coordinator with Hosanna Industries in Bakerstown, PA until 1998. Moving to Ridgeway, SC, he next served as pastor of the Aimwell Presbyterian Church (PCA) from 1998 until 2002. Mike then became associate pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Butler, PA, where in 2004 he became the congregation's interim youth director—once again directing the focus of his ministry to young people. Youth ministry was a key factor in his joining the staff of Seneca Hill Bible Camp in Franklin, PA, as director of operations in 2006. In 2008, he was appointed executive director.



Mike's heart for youth ministry began when he was a student at Grove City College, where he worked with high school students through Young Life. It was a turning point in his life. "God used that experience as formative ministry experience, which subsequently sent me down the path of full time ministry," he says.

Though on his resume it may appear that Mike made a ministry transition from congregation to outdoor camp, he does not view it that way. Instead, he sees it as a transition from serving within one denomination to serving multi-denominations as he ministers to many from Western Pennsylvania/Eastern Ohio communities. He's engaged in preaching and teaching, counseling, evangelism, discipleship, and mentoring—"ministries that span cradle to grave with an occasional wedding sprinkled in the middle!" he explains with a smile. "I am still fulfilling my calling as a pastor to 'prepare God's people for service, that the Body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ,'" he says, citing Ephesians 4:11-13. "I'm just fulfilling my calling in a different surrounding—the unique context of the outdoors."



And in that setting, ministry primarily to youth. "I see in today's young people a hunger for truth lived out in practical ways," Mike observes. He contends that it's not that this generation is different from previous generations; it's that there are multiplied diversions that take up their time yet do not satisfy—more toys, more gadgets, more entertainment, more ways to have fun. Realizing it or not, the emptiness of those very distractions is causing many young people to look for answers, for purpose, for meaning in life.



"As a Christian," Mike says, "I know where the answer lies—in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And key to communicating the message of the Gospel is authen-

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tic relationships.” In the context of camp life, young people can see the Christian life modeled in the counselors, which he hopes also will cause them to hear the message of the Gospel. In contrast, the “come and see an event” approach, so popular in outreach today, Mike finds impersonal and shallow. But truth in love makes way for trusting relationships and the work of real evangelism, discipleship and mentoring.

Mike finds the open, natural outdoors to be an ideal setting for relationship-building. “I will be so bold as to say that relationship is the essence of camp ministry and all the outdoor activities that are enjoyed,” Mike asserts. Here is a typical day:



Reveille at 7:30 am. After breakfast at 8:15, followed by personal devotions and cabin cleanup, the morning focus is usually the Great Commission—locally, nationally, and globally. Often, missionaries on furlough are on hand to speak to the campers. Afternoons are spent in an array of activities with plenty of opportunities for counselor-camper relationship-building. After the evening meal, a Bible study (often led by local pastors), then some more team activities, and a snack and night-time devotions close out the day. Life in Christ’s Kingdom is the purpose and substance of each day.



Knowledge and skill for this practical ministry were in large part received from RPTS. “My degree work at RPTS has prepared me to be a student of the Scriptures and a shepherd to God’s people,” he says. “Knowing, understanding, and applying the Scriptures, and in turn helping God’s people to do the same, are imperative and invaluable skills gained from my seminary training.” Mike is involved in writing curriculum, writing and teaching Bible studies, leading small group studies, and counseling both youth and adults. Often, he draws on his preaching tutelage as he is called upon to fill the pulpit in community churches as a Seneca Hills representative.

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Reformed theology itself is both practical and necessary for effectual ministry, according to Mike. “For me, Reformed theology has never been a flag to plant in the ground. It has always provided me with a lens to view all of life. Reformed theology helps me make sense of the world I live in and the people I minister to. It makes sense of the Scriptures and helps me to understand and apply the Gospel-centered solution rather than a faulty man-centered solution to the spiritual maladies that affect every human being.”



Not surprisingly, Mike’s entire family is involved in the ministry with him. During the summer months, Mike’s wife, Elizabeth, and his children, Jordan, 17, Claire, 15, and Eli, 12, all relocate to the camp each week to serve with him in various staff capacities.



There are two seasons of ministry at the Seneca Hills Camp. The summer season offers week-long camp for youngsters ages 5 to 18. The rest of the year is the retreat season during which either Seneca plans conferences for various Christian groups (such as the popular Memorial Day and Labor Day Family Camps), or simply leases the facilities for church groups to hold their own off-site meetings. Located about an hour and a half north of Pittsburgh, just off Interstate 80, young people as well as families come from a three-hour radius of Seneca Hills Christian Camp to enjoy its natural beauty and Christian character.



For more information, visit www.senecahills.org.

