

Children blossom as readers and confident students in St. Mark UMC's Freedom School

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Posted: August 31 2023 at 11:30 AM

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MOVEMENT ENHANCES LEARNING AT FREEDOM SCHOOL.

St. Mark United Methodist Church in Chicago's Chatham neighborhood has been especially busy this summer. Some of its rooms were buzzing with the sound of children dancing, moving, or discussing a story they heard read aloud that day. After lunch, though, the building would settle into 15 minutes of stillness, when children and adults were quietly reading.

So passed a lively July and August in Freedom School.

Initiating a Children's Defense Fund Freedom School at St. Mark "is a longtime dream of mine," says Rev. Pamela Pirtle, an assistant pastor at the church. She oversees administrative and strategic leadership at the church.

The seven-week summer program is a continuation of the after-school sessions held at St. Mark during the previous academic year. The 46 summer scholars ranged in grades from kindergarten through high-school. They came to receive a healthy, safe, moral, and fair head-start in life and successful passage to adulthood, with the help of caring families and communities, explains the [CDF website](#). At the heart of the program is instruction that encourages children and youth to become independent thinkers, problem solvers, and agents of change in their own communities, the organization says.

Strengthening literacy is one of the primary avenues through which the schools meet their goals for the young scholars, so quite a bit of the program focuses on developing the skills and enjoyment of reading.

Scholars met at St. Mark five days a week and start with a 9 a.m. breakfast. The youngsters then moved into *harambe* (a Swahili word that roughly translates as "all pulling together"), during which they listened to a book read aloud by a guest reader.

The morning sessions are guided by CDF curriculum, which develops scholars' critical thinking skills and invites them to contribute ideas to the group discussion. They also take part in hands-on activities.



BISHOP DAN SCHWERIN READS THE BOOK "CROWN: ODE TO A FRESH CUT" TO FREEDOM SCHOOL STUDENTS.



Northern Illinois's Bishop Dan Schwerin was a recent guest reader. He shared the story *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*, written by Derrick Barnes and illustrated by Gordon C. James. It offers a glimpse into the day in a life of a barbershop in a Black neighborhood—the men who meet there, their conversations, and the community nourished there.

An author who writes haiku, Bishop Schwerin recited to the scholars three of his original poems and invited their reflections. The children enjoyed their conversation with him,

Rev. Pirtle says. (What they found endlessly amazing about the bishop, she says with a chuckle, was that he oversees more than 300 churches!)

Bishop Schwerin says he was moved by the CDF curriculum, particularly in how it “teaches about the inner life, how to find it, express it, and remain grounded in it.” He was impressed that the Freedom School helped scholars who had fallen behind in school to grow significantly in their ability and love of reading.

Following lunch came the quiet reading time. After that, various guest experts offered workshops in the afternoon. Rev. Pirtle lists a chef, photographers, musicians, gardeners, and social-movement therapists among the many leaders who have engaged scholars in these activities.

Sean Collins, clinical supervisor for Counseling Solutions South and West Side, and two of his therapist colleagues lead an especially popular sessions. The three leaders guided the scholars in discussion, regulated activities, and expressive art to help them learn how to express anger and frustration in healthy, constructive ways. Collins also oversees the Justice Advisory Council–funded programs at Kids Above All.

Fridays were particularly fun. On those days, scholars took field trips to museums like the DuSable, Field, and Science and Industry; a community garden, a zoo, and a water park.

CDF's website explains that its Freedom Schools have their origin in the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964, during which college students from around the country traveled to Mississippi to secure justice and voting rights for Black citizens. They also helped lead Freedom Schools, which were aimed at keeping Black children and youth safe and giving them rich educational experiences that were not offered in Mississippi's public schools.

St. Mark's summer program continued the after-school version that the church offered during the 2022-2023 school session. Rev. Pirtle is pleased that St. Mark got to be part of the academic year pilot project.

“I had the opportunity to attend their program this summer, and it was a remarkable demonstration of our CDF Freedom School model,” says Rev. Rachel Birkhahn-Rommelfanger, senior partnerships associate, Faith Communities, for CDF. “St. Mark also did a fantastic job of involving the local community and church members in the program.”

After only 12 months of sessions, the St. Mark school has already borne remarkable results.

Rev. Pirtle offers an example of a reluctant scholar whose grandmother sent her to Freedom School. The child’s elementary class experience had not been inspiring or encouraging for the child. Today, this formerly reticent student is reading twice as much as she once did and readily offers her ideas about what she has learned and read.

Not all the scholars come in with academic challenges, Rev. Pirtle explains. Some are bright and successful in school. A child who is already an academic achiever may be paired with a child who is struggling and together, they instill more confidence in each other.

Even the college interns are energized by their Freedom School leadership. They receive robust training and through experience come to realize that they have the ability to transform the lives of young people.

Freedom School requires a lot of preparation, assistance, and resources—including meals and snacks for the scholars. Even with this level of investment, the schools are more than worth it, Rev. Pirtle says. Churches are ideal hosts; Freedom Schools demonstrate God’s love profoundly.

Rev. Birkhahn-Rommelfanger agrees. “CDF Freedom Schools at churches are especially wonderful because they already have a community to draw from to create a fantastic program for their context.”