

# SUMMER CAMP WITH A DIFFERENCE

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For many, the words “summer camp” conjure up all sorts of fond memories – images of our youth, singing around a campfire, playing sports, exploring the great outdoors, making new friends and, most importantly, having a ton of fun. In one sense, these snippets of our adolescence represent a rite of passage, where we learn fundamental lessons in responsibility, leadership, teamwork, and relating to our neighbor.

Each summer at Camp Allen these experiences come to life in the many great programs offered by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. In focus are the ones offered by Jerusalem Peacebuilders (JPB), a unique nonprofit ministry that works to promote peace by cultivating understanding and mutual respect among young American, Israeli, and Palestinian teenagers.

Yes, JPB offers summer camps, but with a very important difference: intensive, interfaith leadership and peacebuilding goals. Last August, two groups of very special young people enjoyed all the experiences associated with more traditional summer camps while being engaged in programs specially designed to examine the issues and narratives that remain unaddressed and continue to thwart peace in the Holy Lands of the Middle East.

A true experiment in the power of reconciliation, JPB began eight years ago with just a handful of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teens coming together at a remote farm in southern Vermont. Since then, the organization has grown into an exciting four-year program with both summer and in-school offerings that reach hundreds of young leaders year after year.

A good tree bears good fruit, and this past summer JPB led two programs simultaneously at Camp Allen: the Voyager Institute for 14-15-year-olds and the Interfaith Citizenship Institute for 16-17-year-olds. New to 2018, the beginner Voyager Institute completes JPB's four-year model. A bold step forward that also united several ministries in the Diocese of Texas.

Thanks to the leadership and involvement of Camp Allen, Christ Church Cathedral, the Beacon, St. Martin's Church and Palmer Memorial Church, each day teens participated in dialogues and educational workshops examining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other key topics such as morality, communication, identity, conflict resolution, and social justice and environmental stewardship. Helping to make this all happen smoothly, a faithful cadre of two-dozen volunteers from Palmer and other faith communities assist JPB staff and participants with extra supervision, trips to the camp nurse, and essential laundry provision. They too share in this joint ministry of reconciliation.

Religious worship and workshops involving Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are central to JPB's mission. The worship and workshops are conducted by Houston faith leaders Rabbi Steve Gross of the Houston Congregation for Reform Judaism, Imam Mohammed Ahmad of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, and The Rev. Neil Willard of Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church. These faiths reintroduce the participants, and the world, to the true potential of reconciliation when God is deliberately invited to the table.

Heightening their leadership formation were Camp Allen's many signature activities: canoeing, horseback riding, hiking, fishing, volleyball, swimming, and the ropes course. This year's favorites also included an all-camp cookout with Camp Allen staff, cleaning up the Camp Allen community garden, and meeting Camp Good News teens – another youth reconciliation ministry of the diocese.

After a week of hard work and play in the Piney Woods, JPB teens said goodbye to Camp Allen and headed into Houston for additional leadership training, field trips, and public presentations.

While in Houston, participants stayed with welcoming hosts, Christ Church Cathedral and St. Martin's Church. Their final days were spent volunteering with Hurricane Harvey clean-up efforts on the Buffalo Bayou, serving meals to the needy at The Beacon, hosting an interfaith music event at Palmer Memorial

Church, visiting local mosques and synagogues, and touring historic attractions such as the George H. W. Bush Library and the Rothko Chapel.

The young people enjoyed themselves over the two weeks they spent in close quarters with each other. They learned a great deal about acceptance, working through their conflicts peacefully, and addressing global problems. One teen summed up the experience by saying, “The most important thing I learned at JPB was that we have to understand each other’s religion in order to live in peace.”

JPB co-founder Stuart Kensinger also noted, “The power of these programs lies in how God uses them to radiate the divine grace. JPB works specifically with young Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders to advance peace and acceptance. This healing grace touches the lives of all who participate – teens and adults alike. It is knitting together networks of ministry in this diocese and knitting together a common witness of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Houston to the God of Peace.”

Interested in getting involved? JPB’s plans for 2019 include working closely with other ministries in the diocese, growing its summer programs at Camp Allen, launching in-school interfaith programs in Houston, and hosting an adult peacebuilding conference this fall.

Youth and staff applications for JPB Summer Institutes are now open, and JPB is always looking for new partners, volunteers, and opportunities to advance its mission of reconciliation. For more information, please visit [JPB’s website](#) or email JPB Regional Director, [Jack Karn](#).

📁 [Camp Allen News, Diocesan News](#)

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