Recreation areas may seem like child’s play, but our parish playgrounds foster a sense of community and togetherness which extends far beyond the members of a church.

In a retirement mecca like Southwest Florida, the parish playground might seem like an afterthought for most churches. But in recent months, two new playground projects have commenced in the diocese, including a natural playground at St. Hilary, Ft. Myers, and a new play area at St. Vincent, St. Petersburg.

Bishop Dabney Smith, who facilitated the St. Vincent playground through a diocesan growth grant last fall, has personal experience with playground projects. At St. Michael’s and All Angels in South Bend, Indiana where he served as a Rector from 1989 to 1998, the parish came together to build a new playground. The process was so beneficial to the congregation that it became a catalyst for more improvements. “Six years later,” Smith said, “we built a new church.”

Additionally, parishes large and small have accomplished redesigns and updates of older playgrounds. On Marco Island, the playground at St. Mark’s is seen as a major civic amenity and attraction, which is one of the premier attractions in Collier County. “It draws families,” said Cathy Weis, the St. Mark’s, Marco Island parishioner who helped spearhead the complete reconstruction of their playground. “If they live within walking distance, they still come, and use our playground.”

Playgrounds Adapt to Parish Needs

Playgrounds can take on many forms. Some traditional play areas require more space than you’d imagine; space many parishes simply do not have. At the urban Church of the Redeemer in Sarasota where open space is rare, there is only a small courtyard lawn in front of the parish hall that becomes an ersatz play area. Some parishes, such as Good Samaritan, Clearwater have an older play area that has a small amount of durable equipment that is well maintained, including a vintage duck “hobby horse.” Church of the Holy Spirit in Osprey has a small playground utilized by a visiting group on Wednesday nights, and has also been used during a congregation-sponsored after school program. All of our parishes with schools have playgrounds, an amenity required by the state’s Department of Education.

Whatever the approach, having some sort of amenity for kids is a signal to the parish and wider community that youth is important. “As a parent of a toddler and guest of many parishes in the diocese, I am grateful for those that offer a fun and welcoming experience for our two-year old son,” said Greg Randall, director of youth ministry and programming.

The Iterative Approach

Playground improvements can be as varied as play areas themselves, with many ways to accomplish a successful renovation. St. Wilfred’s, Sarasota recently completed a playground renovation, which came about when the church realized the current area no longer meshed with the needs of their preschool. Some equipment was outdated, and much of it was geared towards older children. “It helps people realize that we are whole beings and our physical development matters,” said the Rev. Virginia Herring. “We all need a space to play.”

In previous parishes in North Carolina, Herring said that there had always been a playground, though in some places it had been locked and unavailable on Sundays. In deciding on what to do at St. Wilfred, they not only considered the needs of the school, but the wider neighborhood. When it was time for action, the parish and preschool started by replacing individual pieces of equipment. A used slide, purchased from Tampa, was the first improvement, which filled a temporary need. “That kind of got us through for a little while,” said Herring. St. Wilfred had to meet state school standards and requirements for licensed preschools; any substantial improvements require county building code approval. The retirement of longtime preschool director Lonnie Hershman was the impetus for a small campaign to step up the renovation effort; all told, St. Wilfred spent and raised about $30,000 for the play area.

Church Playground

On Marco Island, St. Mark’s raised $180,000 for a completely rebuilt playground completed in 2016. Cathy Weis said that the playground at the
A few years ago, parishioners at St. Hilary’s removed their older metal play-set, which had seen better days and had recently become unsafe for children. Although funds were available to build a large new metal play-set, and a new location next to the nursery was available, parishioners soon realized that the area contained virtually no shade. Direct sunlight combined with warm Florida temperatures would make the play-set too hot for children to set foot on nine months out of the year. Adding a shade structure seemed a natural solution, but would double the cost to build the playground.

The solution came via a neighboring church who had recently installed a natural playground for their preschool. Research began, and a meeting between members of both congregations followed to determine what elements of the natural playground children gravitated toward, what areas were less popular, and how much additional maintenance would be required were St. Hilary’s to consider this option.

St. Hilary’s decided to give their own natural playground a try for several reasons: costs were less overall, it provides a cooler environment for kids thanks to an abundance of plants and trees, and at any point could easily be converted back to a natural area with little effort.

Everyone involved was very excited about giving community businesses and parishioners of all ages the opportunity to help create and maintain a beautiful, creative, park-like area on our campus. When St. Hilary’s contacted businesses to become “community partners” in this effort, they were just as excited about the project, donating labor and materials, volunteering ideas and offering discounts for products and services. The project received vestry approval in record time, and a week later, a lion’s share of the work was complete. St. Hilary’s officially broke ground on November 10, 2018, and volunteers showed up to help dig out grass, spread mulch, set up garden irrigation systems and plant butterfly garden vegetation.

St. Hilary’s is thrilled to be able to give children and their parents a beautifully shaded natural space which includes a wooden water trough, vegetable and butterfly gardens, a living teepee, leapfrog stumps, a mahogany trunk bench, a sandbox, a grassy play area and a shaded picnic area surrounded by trees which families can enjoy all year long.
island parish had fallen into disrepair; not only was it rusty, but it was not appropriate for the four-year-olds who are in the parish’s VPK program.

Marco Island has a thriving youth ministry, and the parish saw the playground not only as a place for families with young children, but as a draw for the island as a whole. Grandchildren often visit their grandparents during the season, and having something at the church is a welcome benefit for all. The parish’s geography is perfect for a public playground; its location on busy North Collier Boulevard is across the street from the Chamber of Commerce and a Chevron, and directly adjacent to a residential area.

To begin the renovation, the parish needed funding, which was ultimately met by a donation from a local business across the street. The owner’s child had recently passed away, and friends and clients of the store wanted to honor the family in some way. Although the effort began with $10,000 set aside, the project grew along with the overall cost. As gifts came in, parishioners gathered ideas from playground vendors and decided how best to proceed with the play area. Most importantly, a construction supervisor was hired to navigate complex building codes and ensure the work was done safely and correctly.

A key to raising money was getting creative; helping “pave the way” if you will, were engraved pavers sold to benefit the project. “We went to the parish for money,” said Weis. “I was astonished. It all came in.” Altogether, they raised about $180,000, far more than they expected to need. “It took us a couple of years,” said Weis. It took a lot of faith to rebuild the playground, but Weis said that it was a project they needed to do. It has since become a multi-generational island gathering spot–Starbucks is just around the corner–and a centerpiece for families.

“We see adolescents sometimes use playgrounds, especially as they take care of younger children,” agreed Randall. “Believe it or not, I’ve seen a lot of teens engage in great conversation while sitting side-by-side on swings.”