

Camping and the Church

by Lloyd Mattson

FOCUS
SERIES

Focusing
on the
Foundations
of Christian
Camping

It was June 1945, and my well-worn '31 Chevy limped eastward on U.S. 2 toward Spirit, Wisconsin. My goal was Spirit Baptist Church, where my education in the ways of churches was about to begin.

I found the church standing among the fields in quiet, white dignity. I felt comfortably in command, until that day in a tavern called the Green Lantern.

Spirit Township was dry, and the adjoining township was quite wet. The Green Lantern pressed close to the township line. As junior camp at Wood Lake approached, I sought camper prospects in the rural community.

I learned of a boy who had come to the area recently, the foster child of the proprietors of the Green Lantern. Possessed of far more zeal than knowledge, I betook myself to the tavern on a bright July morning to talk about camp.

The folks inside were friendly and courteous. They were pleased that I offered to take their boy to camp. One thing led to another, and I stayed to chat for some time. Meanwhile, my now-familiar Chevy waited patiently in front of the Green Lantern in full view of all who chanced by—and Tillie did.

Tillie, a woman of wide community interests, played piano at the church. Her farm adjoined the church property.

The winds of the storm did

not reach me prior to our Saturday departure for camp, but upon my return a week later, there were winds aplenty! I came home aglow to tell of a great week, but my words were swept away. The pastor, in the Green Lantern! In broad daylight, for all to see! The church was declared all but ruined.

Not many were listening when I told of the evening when I rowed close to shore on Wood Lake facing a small boy who lived in a tavern. I can still remember the rough oars in my hands, the gentle creaking of oarlocks, the warm smell of a northern lake in the summer. The lad's prayer was so simple, so earnest and untaught. He just asked Jesus to come into his heart.

That first summer as a student pastor, I learned what I had suspected ever since I found Christ at a camp. Camp can be a pastor's best friend.

I also learned that if you plan to visit the Green Lantern, park out back! Indeed, Jesus warned His disciples to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16).

An Ally

I believe the local church to be the heart of God's work. I'm grateful for every form of ministry that presents the gospel to people. But the value of all those efforts rests on their relationship to the

church. No work, including camp, will fulfill God's purpose in the lives of people without relating closely to local churches.

It's possible, though, that in our zeal for local churches we have taken some wrong turns. I can easily become jealous of any spiritual influence that I don't control, or any distraction that might lure my people.

I can become obsessed with the average attendance to the point where I become hostile toward anything that might draw one of my parishioners away when church is in session. I may even overlook the pronouns in that blessed promise our Lord made, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18).



Christian Camp and
Conference Association



When I hear myself talking about my church, I need to remember that verse. The church belongs to Jesus; I am His servant only. Yet, since specific people make up the church at which I serve, I must accept responsibility and accountability. In that sense, it is my church, and I am the servant of the people.

If that is so, then I must utilize every help I can find to fulfill God's purpose for His church. It is folly to think I personally can fill every need. One of my strongest allies is the Christian camp.

In Harmony

As church leaders, we take our objectives from the Scriptures: to evangelize, to integrate, and to educate. The Great

Commission provides the outline. Wherever we go, we are obligated to make disciples—followers of Jesus.

We are equally obligated to integrate the disciples into the visible body of Christ. Whatever meaning we attach to baptism, it has that effect. The baptized are recognized as members of the

church, Christ's body. Then we are to educate—to teach all that Jesus commanded, and to lead the disciple into obedience to Jesus Christ.

I have examined the objectives of hundreds of camps and churches, and I find no conflict. Since the camp features programs that people attend for brief periods, it cannot be a church, and shouldn't think of itself as a church.

The camp must turn to the churches for follow-up of campers and guests.

But the camp and the church serve the same Lord with the same objectives. I see the camp as an extension of my work as a pastor.

The Church Outdoors

The church and the camp are uniquely united; the camp is the church at work outdoors. The locale is different, and the methodology may change, but the purpose and power are the same.

Camping is healthy for the flock of God for many reasons, and it's a healthy flock that grows. We can trace God's use of the outdoors as an environment for spiritual discovery back to the patriarchs.

Acts 7:38 speaks of the church in the wilderness. Why do you suppose the Lord didn't chase Pharaoh into the desert and let the children of Israel stay in town? God used the wilderness to train Moses, David, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, and John the Seer.

What does the wilderness offer that you can't find at home? It offers a relief from ordinary distractions, extended time for spiritual reflection, and a healthy change of pace.

The camp also has a better opportunity than the church to teach the unity of the spiritual life. God didn't save folks for Sunday, but for every moment of every day. At camp, the focus rests on life in the Spirit throughout all activity.

Many camps have an evangelistic focus, but most also go deeper and use their organizations for

Christian education. Mature Christian lives are brought to bear on young Christians in an atmosphere that breeds fun and trust. As this atmosphere grows through the camping period, the mind and heart absorb Christian truth by precept and example. Christian educator Dr. Ted Ward once said, "A camp is the greatest environment for learning today."

A Goal for Growth

While camp is often very effective for Christian growth, some churches still aren't interested. The most serious obstacle to camp for church leaders seems to be geography. We may be so prone to measuring success by numbers that we may be terrified by the suggestion that it's proper for people to miss church.

While I don't have enough space to develop the theology of the church and the camp, I will say that I work through the camp to serve my people, gaining benefits for them I can't offer at home.

Obviously, I am concerned with a camp's doctrinal stance. I would not knowingly send people where false teaching was present. But I would be overwhelmed with joy if the whole junior department was missing some Sunday because they were all attending camp. If the average attendance was a problem (which it isn't), I would simply count them!

My goals as a pastor are fixed on the spiritual growth of the people for whom God has made me responsible. I am convinced a camping experience can move them closer to God's purpose than whatever I might do in the service they miss.

Lending Aid

As the Christian camp offers much to the church, the church has a responsibility to the camp. Some church leaders fear that the camp will drain dollars, and there is no denying the cost of building and maintaining camps. But when you divide the cost among campers, the expense is modest.

Camps hope to operate programs and pay personnel from

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program fees. Capital improvements must be funded from other sources. The churches that use the camp should bear a fair share of these costs, and not grudgingly.

Some churches and groups of churches own camps. Many churches are served by privately operated camps. The latter are most apt to feel the coolness of churches toward support; churches often feel it's not their responsibility. Christian camping is missions in the primary sense of the word and deserves missionary support.

Additionally, many camps look to churches to supply board members. Churches should aggressively seek participation, giving input at the highest administrative and advisory levels.

A few camps have gone astray from the basic purpose of a Bible camp, and some have moved beyond reasonable limits in program, but churches that shun leadership responsibility must share the blame.

If you encounter a camp that refuses counsel or projects a fierce independence, hunt out another camp. Camps cannot survive without churches.

Spiritual support goes without saying. The camp and its leaders should frequently find a place in the prayers of the church, publicly and privately. Camp leaders should be listed among the church's missionaries. They often become forgotten and lonely.

The church that views the Christian camp as competition loses on all counts. I see the camp as my friend out there, working hard to serve my kids, youth, and adults.

Generating Support

A firm belief in and support of the power and benefits of Christian camping will do limited good if we fail to engage the local church fellowship.

Early in my pastoral career, I met "Bible Camp" Bill. Bill lived for one thing: to win the district camp attendance trophy, and he did, year after year. To many, Bill was a nuisance. He pushed camp all year long.

It never satisfied Bill just to

tack camp posters on the church bulletin board. He worked on three groups: church leaders, parents, and prospective campers.

Some smiled at Bill's enthusiasm, thinking there must be more important matters in life than hauling kids to camp, but I doubt that anyone in the church made greater impact on the spiritual lives of more people than Bill.

To build camp enthusiasm, look for a man or woman like Bill.

Without enthusiasm at the leadership level, nothing gets off the ground. Many a worthy cause has been tolerated to death. Camp must be high on the agenda of the top-level church administration; getting young people and families to camp demands hard work and considerable money.

In most homes, parents hold the key to a child's participation in camp programs. The fee is only part of the problem. Except for among the disadvantaged, perceived value—not dollars—is the real issue. Time and again churches have found that subsidizing camp didn't solve the attendance problem.

Though camp fees will continue to mount, along with all living costs, many parents will recognize the vacation bargain offered by most Christian camps. You may wish to point this out, comparing Bible camp costs with fees charged by private or agency camps.

Parents with camping experience are often already convinced, for they know the values. But many prospective campers come from unchurched homes, where spiritual values aren't recognized. Those parents may respond better to information about the recreational and educational benefits camp offers. Some simply need a visit or phone call to encourage them to participate.

Young people are also influential in the camp decision. They present the least resistance to camp promotion if a camp tradition is alive in the church. When this isn't so, difficult problems may exist, for kids generally move in clusters. If

you can enroll the leaders, others will follow. Promotion among potential campers is a continuing challenge.

"Bible Camp" Bill had the most effective promotion down pat. He took his vacation and drove the kids to camp. He spent at least one week each summer as a counselor. He drove to camp with kids on other weekends, as well.

When an adult loved and trusted by the youth offers to take a group to camp and spends the week with them, the promotion becomes almost irresistible. Children respond to almost anything suggested by enthusiastic adults they admire.

We can trace God's use of the outdoors as an environment for spiritual discovery back to the patriarchs.



If Christian camp values are real, then going out of our way and incurring whatever expense is needed to make camping possible for our church kids and families is a worthy missionary investment.

I urge pastors to become

Children and youth who enjoy camp with their parents and make friends with other kids at camp are likely to sign up for next summer on their own.

personally involved in camp, attending when possible, and encouraging camp enthusiasm constantly. "Bible Camp" Bill never had to sell me. I do everything possible to recruit and support camp boosters, which is in line with my perception of the pastor's role.

It's hard, though, for lay leaders to maintain enthusiasm when the pastor is indifferent.

Keeping Camp Strong

Surely every pastor knows of several good things he should be doing, but isn't because he simply runs out of push. By some mysterious principle good causes fade, whether they are choirs, youth groups, outreach programs, or camping. The mix of leadership and opportunity that led to a surge of enthusiasm and growth passes, and the magic is gone. Most often you will find a person at the core. A job change, for example, called a family away and momentum was lost.

But camping is too important to leave dormant or dead. For a time it may be necessary to load the church program with camp. Ideas include doing skits in Sunday school, having Sunday evening camp nights, having camping themes for dinners, and putting up camping décor in the fellowship area (or even the sanctuary).

I once spoke at a banquet where the leaders had transformed the church basement into a camp. Trees were propped in the corners. A small tent, complete with glowing campfire, occupied the far end of the room. A canoe with paddles and packs rested near one wall. Photos, drawings, and last year's camp slides added their flavor. I don't know why they hauled me across the country to tell stories!

Taking groups on a camp visit in the off-season has promotional

value, too. Kids are wary of new experiences and unfamiliar territory. Seeing the camp may make them more comfortable with the idea of spending a week there. If you can move the whole group camp-ward, your chances of success with shy individuals are greatly increased.

Fall, winter, and spring retreats, especially for older campers, can strengthen the camping tradition in your church. One-day outings for several churches might be arranged. Family camp offers special promotional benefits. Children and youth who enjoy camp with their parents and make friends with other kids at camp are likely to sign up for next summer on their own.

Dealing with Dollars

In addition to the challenge of promoting camp is the issue of fees. Some families are relatively poor, and they simply can't afford camp, no matter how much they believe in it. Other families have enough money, but they are indifferent to camp values and unwilling to pay. We can easily write off such families, but if our purpose remains to meet spiritual needs, getting kids to camp reaches beyond the question of ability to pay.

Consider what you invest in an evangelistic outreach or other major church program. Count all the costs: travel, honorarium, entertainment, promotion, utilities for the building, guest musicians, and so forth. It adds up to quite a sum.

Now measure the results, not only at the moment, but down the line. Compare the fruit of a church event with camp. I don't suggest that these events are not worthy; I only plead that the cost of helping youth and families get to camp be put into perspective. Camp help is surely an acceptable missionary investment.

Churches have adopted many plans to help with camp fees. Some churches offer a week at camp to any youngster who wishes to go.

Parents are asked to give what they can, and the church writes a check for total registrations. Other churches pay a fixed percentage of all fees, with extra help as needed.

We have tried the camp barrel plan, allowing parents to drop camper registrations into a container with whatever they can pay toward the cost. We invite everyone to give toward camp costs, helping all who wish to enjoy a week at camp.

Assorted incentives have been employed to motivate youngsters toward camp. Some churches and camps honor Bible memorization or faithful Sunday school attendance with camp scholarships. Camps may assist by offering registration discounts for recruiting new campers. A long list of promotion and incentive ideas can be gathered from churches that believe in camping.

Money is most often not the major problem. Often more scholarship help is available than there are campers willing to use it. Yet we have more camp prospects in our churches than available camp space could possibly accommodate. One study by a denomination strong on camping found that fewer than 25 percent of its children and youth of camping age attended any camp.

Life holds so many appealing distractions that millions of boys and girls from our churches miss the benefits of camp each year. That is a challenge each church must face.

Still, when I look over my congregation and hear their comments, I realize that more have been touched for Christ through camping than through any other activity we offer as a church. A friend like that deserves all the support I can muster. ☺

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