Christian Camping Ministry: Impacts and Significance to the Church*

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Abstract:
An inadequate scholarly foundation has allowed for misinformation and unsubstantiated claims related to Christian camping ministry. The Effective Camp Research Project used a grounded theory approach to characterize a particular form of camping ministry, in hopes of providing a firm foundation for future research. The potential impacts of the camp experience are revealed, along with a distinct camp model, which has important implications for ministry in multiple settings and particular relevance to outreach ministries.

Introduction

Christian camping ministry is a woefully understudied field. The lack of scholarly attention over the past three decades has had significant consequences for ministry practitioners. The most apparent consequence is the wide diversity of misinformation and unsubstantiated claims related to the field. This results in doubts about the benefits of camping ministries and lower participation rates. Another important consequence is that scholars and ministry practitioners have not adequately considered the significance of the summer camp ministry model to the church as a whole. This paper examines new research on the impacts related to a specific model of camping ministry and considers the implications of this model for other ministries of the church.

The 1980s saw a shift in the field of youth ministry to what Mark Senter describes as the "professionalization of youth ministry" (Senter, 292). Prior to this shift, camping ministry was one of many fields closely related to youth ministry and receiving attention from scholars and curriculum developers. Professionalization included the founding of academic guilds, journals, and conferences specifically focusing on youth ministry. Professionalization has also resulted in scores of large research projects to assess the relevance and best practices of youth ministry. Unfortunately, camp is notably absent from nearly every major study, and part of the reason for this absence is the treatment of camp in scholarly literature. Asserting the relevance of their field as an academic discipline meant that scholars had to respond to critics who characterized youth ministry as silly songs and games. Senter describes the dilemma of youth ministry scholars, "Perhaps the most frequently repeated criticism of Protestant youth ministries at the beginning of the twenty-first century was the accusation that they were merely fun and games" (Senter, 307). The result in the literature is that camping ministry is frequently used as a negative or contrasting

example: the fun and games sideshow of youth ministry. Mark Devries, Duffy Robbins, Chap Clark, and Andrew Root are all examples of prominent youth ministry writers who contrast serious theological thinking or exemplary ministry practice with anecdotal accounts from camp that are portrayed as banal or theologically shallow. Devries contrasts his *sustainable* youth minister with a stereotypical "camp counselor youth worker" (Devries, 140). Robbins critiques youth ministries that emphasize "warm fuzzies" over theological depth by sharing an anecdote about a camp activity that leaders repeated because it consistently made kids cry (Robbins, 24-26). Clark shares an anecdote about a young believer who had an emotional conversion experience at camp but quickly "left the faith behind" in college as an example of a faith that is not *sticky* (Powel and Clark, 31-32). Root contrasts the stereotypical camp experience with what he considers more Christ-centered relational ministry, asserting that camp "is self enclosed, and as self-enclosed it exists for its short time by forgetting the messy realities of our day-to-day lives" (Root, 197). These writers do not qualify their critiques with positive examples or best practices in camping ministry; they let the stereotype or anecdotes serve as their only references to camp. These predominantly negative characterizations have a cumulative effect on professional respect and consideration of the field's relevance, resulting in most youth ministry researchers overlooking camp as a potentially significant influencer on faith formation and discipleship.

The negative characterizations are unfortunate because what little scholarly research is available offers encouraging evidence that the camp experience has significant and long-term effects on participants. The National Study of Youth and Religion found in 2003 that 39 percent of all American teenagers have attended a religious summer camp at least once, including more than half of both Mainline and Conservative Protestants (Smith and Denton, 53-54). Secondary

analysis of these data showed that the impacts of these camp experiences were significant and long-lasting. The analysis demonstrated, "On measures of communal spirituality (frequency of religious service attendance, college campus ministry participation, and participation in religious small groups), a significant positive effect is clearly evident in the five year follow-up, even when controlling for seventeen different variables" (Sorenson 2014, 28). This key piece of evidence from a major youth ministry study is supported by research on summer camps. The American Camp Association (ACA) is the leader in camping research, and a nationwide study of all camp types (only about a quarter of which are religious) revealed that campers exhibited significant growth in ten developmental outcomes, including "spirituality," and this growth persisted at least six months after the camp experience (Thurber, et al, 252). A study of camping ministry's role in the educational ministries of four Mainline Protestant denominations offers compelling evidence that camp serves as a sort of "theological playground" where young people explore and come to new understandings of their faith in ways that are sometimes considered transformative (Sorenson 2016, 229). The findings of these studies together make a strong case for the continued relevance of camping ministry in faith formation of young people.

There is a clear need for a more robust approach to research about the camping ministry experience. Some of the misunderstandings and stereotypes perpetuated in the youth ministry literature are the result of conflating very different forms of camping ministry or making a single experience normative to the whole field. The literature does not agree on the common characteristics of camping ministry because writers are basing their knowledge of the field on specific experiences rather than a systematic study. The lack of common terminology and the general confusion about camping ministry in the literature signal the need for a grounded study of the Christian summer camp experience. A grounded study allows researchers to move away

from assumptions and stereotypes to focus instead on the perspectives of the participants themselves. Theories arise from the gathered data in a *constructivist* approach to research, rather than the more *positivist* approaches that focus on testing hypotheses or preconceived notions. Though there are many forms of camping ministry, including retreats, day camp, family camp, adventure trips, and much more, the most common references in the literature are to the residential summer camp experience, in which young participants stay for at least a week at a time in gendered housing units supervised by adult mentors, who are oftentimes young adults. Examining and characterizing weeklong Christian summer camp experiences were the aims of the research project detailed below.

Project Overview and Methodology

The Effective Camp Research Project (ECRP) adopted a methodology of grounded theory in order to develop a rich description of the Christian summer camp experience grounded in the perspectives and specific vocabulary of the primary camp participants themselves, along with members of their supporting networks. The research question was: *What is the impact of the one-week summer camp experience on the lives of the primary participants and their supporting networks?* The primary participants included the young people who attended weeklong residential camp programs, and the project focused on ages 11-to-14. Summer staff members were responsible for supervising and guiding the youth participants during the camp week, and these individuals stayed at camp for the entire summer camp season. They were also considered primary participants, though the project focused primarily on the youth participants. Supporting networks were considered adults involved in nurturing and caring for the primary participants. The project specifically targeted parents/guardians and church leaders.

The project sought to accomplish the goal of rich description by focusing on a specific cross-section of the field, so the selected camps were intentionally similar in terms of program philosophy and clientele. The granting organization for the project helped to determine that the sample would include Lutheran camping ministry organizations in Wisconsin.[1] The narrow geographic region and denominational family (several Lutheran denominational bodies are represented at the three camps) helped eliminate many of the intervening variables in order to prioritize rich description over broad generalization. The three organizations were selected from among a dozen Lutheran camping organizations in Wisconsin based on their program availability for summer campers in the selected age range, their different locations within the state (southwest, northwest, and southeast), and their willingness to participate in the project. Participating organizations included Sugar Creek Bible Camp (Ferryville, WI), Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Camp (Amery, WI), and Lutherdale Ministries (Elkhorn, WI).

Researchers gathered six streams of data from each of the three camping organizations. The data streams included an interview with the camp director, a four-day summer camp site visit with copious field notes, two camper focus groups (girls and boys), a summer staff member focus group, a focus group with congregational leaders present at camp during the site visit, and a survey of parents following their children's camp experience. Three separate researchers coded the transcripts from the three interviews and twelve focus groups, along with the field notes, to ensure inter-rater reliability. The parent surveys included four open-ended questions and thirteen quantitative questions. A total of 386 surveys were received. The quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics, while the open-ended responses were coded and included in consideration of the emerging themes. The coding process followed Charmaz's methodology of

[1] This project was generously funded, in part, by Siebert Lutheran Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides grants and services to Lutheran organizations in the state of Wisconsin.

initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 45-71). This process allows for the themes to emerge from the data themselves and helps to reduce researcher bias. Direct quotes are cited with the camp name in short form (Sugar Creek, Camp Wapo, or Lutherdale) and the data stream in short form (boys, girls, summer staff, parents, director, church leaders, or field notes).

Research Findings

The clearest finding of the study is that the Christian summer camp experience directly impacted the participants in empirically recognizable ways, and these impacts extended to their supporting networks. The positive impacts were enumerated across all data streams and all three camps. The remarkable consistency of the descriptors across the data streams made it apparent that the impacts were specific and recognizable. The consistency allowed for a classification of key aspects of the camp experience that arose from the data themselves. These classifications emerged in the thematic coding stage as characteristics that are fundamental to the camp experience. Five such characteristics emerged, and these together comprise what is being called the *camp model*. These characteristics are: camp is relational, a safe space, participatory, different from home, and faith centered. The positive impacts of the camp experience are each related to one or more of the camp model's fundamental characteristics.

Figure A: The Camp Model

The data suggest that the five fundamental characteristics of the camp model have no set order or direction of influence. The commonalities of what participants describe as *camp* are emergent from the dynamic interaction of these characteristics. The model suggests that if one characteristic breaks down, the camp experience as a whole fundamentally changes to the point where it is no longer recognizable to participants. This model also suggests that the individual characteristics function only as part of the whole, so ministry leaders duplicating one or more characteristics of the camp model should not expect impacts similar to the camp experience unless all five characteristics are present.

The specific impacts of the camp model varied widely in this study, demonstrating that this model of ministry does not *cause* change. More appropriately stated, the camp model opens the possibility for change. Some participants or their parents described the camp experience as *life changing*, while they more frequently made claims of less dramatic impacts, and there were also participants who identified no significant impacts at all. Each participant brought a unique

background and personal narrative that resulted in diverse interpretations of the camp experience. A response to the Lake Wapogasset ("Camp Wapo") parent survey is instructive:

> *Her mom is going through a divorce. She was sad and anxious but wanted this camp experience. She made friends, learned how to pray, learned about faith and was uplifted and healed throughout the week. It was one of the best weeks of her life according to her: "I'm not depressed, my appetite is back, I believe I can make friends in a new school, I am closer to God." This camp experience for her was the best!*

All five fundamentals of the camp experience are evident in this description, operating in conjunction with the particular contextual realities of the camper. She had a powerfully impactful camp experience in part because of the uncertainties and anxieties she had in her home situation. Separation from the difficulties of home gave her a new perspective on those challenges and an opportunity to restructure her personal narrative in light of the unique atmosphere of camp. She found at camp a safe space where she was "uplifted and healed" from her sadness and anxiety with help from the relationships she formed with new friends. She participated in forms of prayer that were new to her, helping to facilitate a deeper relationship with God. The direct quote from the camper lists substantial impacts on her emotional, physical, psychosocial, and spiritual well-being.

It is difficult to characterize negative camp experiences with the data from this study because the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Parents were asked to rate their child's camp experience on a scale of 1-to-10 (with 10 being "superior experience"), and fully 94 percent rated it an 8 or higher, with nearly half (48 percent) giving a perfect 10. The few negative responses strengthen the argument for the integrity of the camp model. One parent explained the rating of a 5 out of 10, "She felt lost in the shuffle. No real bonds with people" (Wapo parent), suggesting that a breakdown in the *relational* characteristic resulted in a breakdown of the model as a whole. An explanation of a 3 out of 10 suggests a similar model breakdown related to *camp*

is a safe space: "He was feeling ill, went to the nurse, was given 'pills' and sent back to camping. When he asked to call home, he was refused…Our son was running a fever of 101.3 the day he was picked up, and it took him over a week to feel better. We will not be back" (Sugar Creek parent). Another breakdown is evident related to *camp is participatory* from a parent who rated the experience a 6 out of 10. These are three of only nine cases of parents that rated the experience less than 7 out of 10, and they strengthen the argument that all five of the fundamental characteristics must be present for the camp model to function. If one breaks down, the whole model breaks down. The paucity of negative responses across the data set demonstrate that the vast majority of camp participants interpret the experience in overwhelmingly positive terms, so a much larger data set is needed to confirm how and why some individuals have overall negative experiences.

More than Fun and Games

Camp is fun. That was the primary expectation of campers, staff members, and parents. *Fun*, *enjoyment*, and words like *awesome* were the most common descriptors that campers and staff members used in the focus groups. Over 97 percent of parent survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed, "My child had fun at camp." Parent responses also made clear that most parents did not have expectations for the camp experience beyond their children being safe and having fun. They were not looking for impacts or dramatic changes. They were looking for smiles. If their children looked healthy and were smiling when they picked them up at the end of the camp week, parents rated the experience at least an 8 out of 10. These seemingly modest expectations can be explained by understanding that parents were entrusting their children to camp staff members for an entire week. Even those that were not anxious about some calamity befalling their children at camp may have been concerned about their children making friends or enjoying

the activities. It is, therefore, not surprising that parents viewed the experience as successful if their children were smiling and in one piece at the end of the week. What this means from the perspective of the research question is that the impacts parents identified were largely unexpected. This makes it surprising that 92 percent of parents agreed or strongly agreed, "It is clear that camp had an impact on my child." Parents were generally not searching for changes or impacts, making those they identified highly reliable from a research perspective.

The identification of specific impacts also allows movement beyond simple descriptors like *fun* or *awesome*. Nearly all of the participants, parents, and church leaders can agree that camp is fun, but the fundamentals of the experience lie underneath this descriptor. Fun may be the most readily identified outcome of camp, but it is not a fundamental characteristic of the experience. It is important when characterizing the camp experience to move beyond the assertion that camp is fun because of the tendency to downplay the significance of the experience, as seen in the literature. Researchers observed and heard from camp participants experiencing a wide variety of emotions, including deep sadness in response to a cabin mate's home difficulties, fear in response to a new physical challenge like high ropes, frustration in response to conflicts among cabin mates, and deep gratitude as they processed new revelations about their relationships with God. Words like *fun* became summarizing descriptors of all these experiences. The data suggest, therefore, that fun is not a fundamental characteristic of the camp model but rather an interpretation of the model as a whole. We turn now to the five characteristics that the data suggest are fundamental to the camp model.

Camp is Relational

Relationality is, perhaps, the most recognizable of the five fundamental characteristics of the camp model. The three site visits were filled with observations related to the intensely

relational environment of camp. Participants played, prayed, ate, slept, worked, and worshiped together. Programs at each of the camps featured intentional community building activities like low ropes courses and cooperative games. There were also very intimate relational encounters, including daily small group Bible studies at each of the camps, evening devotions in the intimate setting of the sleeping area with everyone in their pajamas, and frequent one-on-one conversations. *New friends* and *relationships* were the most common thematic topics, after *fun* and *enjoyment*, that campers and staff members described in the focus groups. Increased frequency is not interpreted as increased importance of this characteristic to the camp model but rather the importance of relationality to human life itself, as demonstrated in the fields of psychology (Bowlby), neuroscience (Siegel), and theological anthropology (Loder). From the earliest stages of infancy, a human being longs for and is dependent on others, and this need for relationship continues throughout life. Loder helps to interpret this theologically, linking the longing for human relationship to ultimate longing for relationship with the Author of creation. He describes this as "the longing in persons for a cosmic ordering, self-confirming presence of a loving other, a longing for that which defines what it means to be human and makes us over in its image" (Loder, 119). This human longing for attachment and relationship with others is why this characteristic is the most readily identifiable aspect of the entire camp experience.

The relationships formed among camper groups during each week of camp became extensions of the close community that the summer staff members formed over the course of the whole summer. One staff member alluded to this extension, "It's a true Christian community here. We all care about each other and we all love each other and we truly care about these kids that come here" (Lutherdale staff). Participants used familial terms (e.g. *siblings*) to describe camp relationships, and some referred to camp as *a second home*. Some campers contrasted the

intimacy and acceptance at camp with relationships at home or at school, demonstrating how different characteristics of the camp environment (relational and different from home) function together. A camper explained to his parents, "My friends at camp are so much nicer than my friends at school. They let me be myself" (Sugar Creek parents). In addition to connecting the characteristics of camp as relational and different from home, this camper also notes that camp became a *safe space* to be himself in ways he contrasted with school. This theme of authenticity was pervasive among staff and campers, who described how they *fit in* at camp. One camper explained, "We're all so different, but we all came together and it was a puzzle that fit perfectly together. Like a 500-piece puzzle you just put together for the first time" (Lutherdale girls).

Camp is a Safe Space

Safety at camp includes physical, emotional, and spiritual safety. Signs of physical safety are the most outwardly apparent, with regular facility maintenance, lifeguards at all aquatics activities, extensive safety measures on the ropes courses, and careful food preparation. Fully 94 percent of parent survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their children's physical needs were taken care of at camp. The data reveal that emotional and spiritual safety are equally important. The young boy climbing the thirty-foot pole of the high ropes course at Lutherdale was securely harnessed and on-belay. His physical safety was not in question, but that did not override his fear of heights. The question was not whether it was physically safe for him to climb to the top but rather whether it was emotionally safe for him to ask if he could come down after climbing halfway. The safe space of camp meant that he could come down without fear of ridicule. On the contrary, his cabin mates and counselor encouraged him the whole time and praised his efforts. One camper explained the emotional and spiritual safety of camp, "I feel like no one will judge you because of what you believe here. That's why I like it" (Wapo boys). The

theme of *judgment* was common in the camper focus groups to describe exclusion or ridicule experienced away from camp, particularly at school. Parents confirmed the importance of this characteristic, describing their children's experiences of "feeling safe" (Wapo parent) and "feeling loved" (Sugar Creek parents) at camp.

Feeling safe helped strengthen the relational bonds among campers and facilitated their openness to new experiences and the faith-centered nature of the camp environment. One camper illuminated how she and her cabin mates felt free from pressures to conform to societal norms when she said, "You can focus on God, not what you're going to wear tomorrow" (Wapo girls). Camp was spiritually safe to these girls and other campers who explained that they felt like they were not allowed to express their faith in other contexts. "You can openly talk about your faith. You don't have to not say anything" (Wapo girls). All three camps had examples of campers feeling safe to try new things or pray out loud for the first time. The importance of safe space to personal growth is confirmed in psychology literature. Attachment theorist John Bowlby describes the "secure base" in terms of close proximity to attachment figures, who for children are usually their parents. Anxiety is already at an elevated level because camp is *different from home*, so creating space where participants feel safe is essential if they are to interpret the experience positively. Bowlby explains that growth is stifled when a person is in an unsafe or insecure environment. He writes, "When an individual (of any age) is feeling secure he is likely to explore away from his attachment figure" (Bowlby, 121). The feelings of profound safety described by campers and staff members demonstrate why many of them were open to significant experiences of emotional and spiritual growth.

Camp is Participatory

The camp experience was filled with kinesthetic, multi-sensory activities. Some of these were novel activities like horseback riding, canoeing, or ropes courses, while others were familiar games like gaga ball, basketball, or capture the flag. These provided opportunities for campers to play, learn, and engage those around them in unique ways. The campers recognized that these activities were youth-focused, sometimes contrasting this with other contexts like church or the classroom, which they generally characterized as sitting still and receiving information passively. Participants were consistently moving and exploring in the camp environment. Many of the songs had actions to facilitate memory and physical participation in the worship experiences. One camper reflected, "It's the best way for kids, because a lot of adults probably wouldn't like the way that they teach things, like the goofy songs and all that, but it's perfect for our age" (Lutherdale boys). Daniel Siegel confirms this camper's assessment through his work in interpersonal neurobiology, arguing that not only do all minds learn better through active engagement, but that the changes taking place in the adolescent brain drive "an inner motivation to try something new and feel life more fully, creating more engagement in life" (Siegel, 8). The games and activities at camp were not mere time-fillers or ways to tire participants. They had intentional didactic functions, and this was clear to the participants. "They're teaching us things without us really knowing that we're being taught," one camper explained, adding, "There's always a point to the games" (Sugar Creek girls). Many of the young people had never prayed out loud, read scripture to others, or helped to lead worship services, but these activities were common in the camp environment. They learned the language and practices of faith by actually doing them. "It makes you feel like you're actually a part of it," one camper explained about the ability to move, dance, and participate in the worship services (Sugar Creek boys).

The outdoor settings of the camps helped to facilitate the highly participatory, experiential environments. One camper reflected on sleeping outside for the first time, "It was amazing to look at the stars and see the moon and know that God created everything and God created all the beauty" (Sugar Creek girls). She experienced something new to her that brought her up short, and because she was in a faith-centered community, she interpreted the experience through the lens of faith. Campers worshiped in multi-sensory environments like campfire circles, in swimming pools, under the stars, and atop the climbing tower at Lutherdale. Each of these settings added to their awareness of specific aspects of the worship service and helped them actively engage in the experience. The curious thing is that, while camps made effective use of their outdoor spaces, there was little indication that this element was fundamental to the experience itself. Many of the activities could have been done in indoor spaces, and some of them were, in fact, during inclement weather. The three camps also had very different outdoor spaces available to the campers. Sugar Creek housed barely 150 campers on more than 650 acres of land that featured forests, prairies, and swamps. Camp Wapo, in contrast, housed more than 350 campers on about 25 acres, with only a few places to go where a building of some sort was not visible. When staff members and visiting church professionals are added, the population density of the Camp Wapo property during summer camp is approximately that of Washington, DC. The entire feel of the experience was qualitatively different for the researchers, but the descriptions of the campers were remarkably similar, suggesting that this camp model is not limited to a specific place but rather is highly adaptive. This also suggests that the outdoor environments are not independently fundamental to the camp model but rather function to enhance the participatory nature of camp, along with the feeling of being away from home.

Camp is Different from Home

All three camps provided set-apart locations that offered physical and emotional distance from what participants considered normal. The experience afforded deep reflection on the differences between camp and their home contexts, in some cases providing important perspective on their lives at home. One camper explained, "I feel like people don't really end up getting away from everything that they're comfortable with…Once you actually get away from your life, you can see a whole different angle, and it can be a lot more fun and exciting" (Lutherdale girls). Differences from home included physical aspects like novel activities and new sleeping arrangements, but the contrasts that participants most frequently noted were social and relational differences. They were treated differently and encouraged to participate in familiar activities in new ways. Many participants relished a greater sense of ownership of their actions and decisions than they experienced in the home environment. Each camp had programmatic elements that facilitated camper choice, and Lutherdale even provided a setting in which group representatives met to negotiate the activity schedule for the day. These opportunities for decision making away from the watchful eyes of parents and expectations of their school peers contributed to a sense of independence for many of the campers. Psychologist and camp writer Michael Thompson believes that camp is one of the best places available for young people to practice differentiation from their parents, a task that he and other psychologists assert is essential for adolescent development. "I'm so glad that their parents aren't here," he writes of camp. "Because I believe that the developmental leaps these children have achieved in a week would not have taken place if their parents had been present" (Thompson, 5). One camper put it simply, "You get treated like a person rather than like a little kid" (Wapo girls). The tying of independence and agency to personhood is striking. This increased agency gave campers space to take personal ownership of their faith. One camper explained, "I feel like the counselors help

us grow in our faith with Jesus. Even though they help us with that, I feel like we take on our own responsibility, too. We can grow in our faith on our own, independently" (Sugar Creek girls). There is a dynamic interplay in this reflection between the characteristics of the relational environment of camp, the safe space to explore questions of personal identity, and the increased agency of being away from home that together facilitated ownership of the Christian faith.

One of the most distinct differences that participants described was absence from technology, particularly social media, cell phones, television, and video games. Surprisingly, their assessment of the absence of technology was overwhelmingly positive. One camper said, "If you look around you in the city, you'll see a bunch of people walking really fast, talking on their phone…you don't really see people just stopping and looking around at the world, and camp has given us a chance to do that" (Lutherdale girls). Some parents also noted a decrease in dependence on electronics after campers returned home. This particular difference was closely tied to the *participatory* characteristic, since campers recognized that they were being active and enjoying the outdoors instead of interacting with electronics.

Camp is Faith-Centered

Camp participants at these three camps engaged in the rhythm of daily Christian living. One camper said of practicing faith, "It's part of my daily routine now" (Wapo boys). The daily routine included Christian devotional practices in the morning and at bedtime, a Bible study, and at least one worship service. A camper described the increased frequency, "At home, you basically only go to church once a week. Here, you're constantly learning about God" (Sugar Creek girls). Faith was not compartmentalized from games and other activities but rather infused every aspect of the programs. A camper explains, "No matter what we're doing, they intertwine the Christian stuff into it. When we were canoeing, it was about God's water. Same with the

swimming. When we're doing the high ropes, it's our trust that God won't let us fall and our teammates won't let us fall. Wherever we go, we try to see God in whatever we're doing" (Lutherdale girls). Kenda Dean, one of the few youth ministry scholars to write consistently of the importance of the camp experience, describes camp as a sort of "faith immersion" experience. She writes, "The God-language used at camp is seldom a tool for retrieving history or casting a vision for the future; rather, it is the decoder ring for teenagers' *immediate experience* of God during the event itself and for interpreting one's life in relationship to this experience" (Dean, 155). Focus group members consistently reported enjoying the faith immersion of the camp experience and spoke enthusiastically about faith expressions. Several campers spoke of new Bible passages they found inspiring or interesting, and some demonstrated the awareness that Dean describes of the Bible's connection to daily life. For example, one boy expressed his confidence that God would not give up on his atheist friend because of his reading of Jonah: "The Ninevites were spared, even though they did all those bad things" (Lutherdale boys).

Parents expressed delight that their campers were citing scripture and reading the Bible, demonstrating that participants continued to incorporate faith into their lives after returning home. Fully 90 percent of parent respondents agreed or strongly agreed, "My child grew in his or her faith." It is clear that the combination of the faith-centered environment with the other fundamental characteristics of camp helped to change many participants' perspectives on living a life of faith. Some grasped for the first time an understanding that faith expressions should be participatory, relational, and even fun. The separation from the home environment gave some participants perspective on their life of faith at home. One camper summed it up, "I feel as

though praising God isn't a thing that I hate doing anymore. It's a lot more fun. I haven't been doing it, really going to church. I see why we do it now" (Sugar Creek boys).

Evidence of Long-Term Impact

These five fundamental characteristics combine in dynamic interplay to produce the *camp model* present at these three camps, and the model itself opens the space for positive impacts that continue affecting participants and their supporting networks beyond the one-week camp experience. A minority of parents and participants said that impacts faded shortly after camp or were "short-lived (Sugar Creek parent), but there were many more frequent observations of listing impacts extending months or even years after returning home. It was common for summer staff members and the congregational leaders present at camp to explain how their camper experience had influenced them to become counselors or pastors in order to minister to young people or *give back* in some way to the camp that influenced them. These observations, while important to consider, were expected because of the clear buy-in that staff members and visiting clergy already have to the camp model. They may represent a small minority of participants who have a significantly impactful experience. The more compelling evidence for long-lasting impacts comes from the parent survey.

Parents consistently identified specific positive changes that they saw in their children, and the impacts are clustered around the five characteristics of the camp model. Parents consistently expressed joy that their children seemed happier since returning from camp, and many noted that they were singing the camp songs around the house. In answer to the survey question, "What changes have you seen in your child?" about half (48 percent) identified specific personality changes like increased self-confidence, independence, and care for others. About a third (31 percent) identified positive changes related to faith, including more frequent faith

practices (especially prayer and Bible reading), willingness to discuss faith, and desire to attend church. Examples from each camp help illustrate the observed changes.

> *He has been more self-confident and wants to be more in charge of himself. He also talked about his faith and questions he had raised there. Interestingly, he held back on something they talked about because he felt it was personal to the individual having shared it. He seemed on the edge of a big change.*
>
> (Lutherdale parent)

> *She always comes back saying "please and thank you." She reminds us all to use kind words and she tries much harder to help out and be pleasant. She also reads her Bible a lot.*
>
> (Sugar Creek parent)

> *She is excited and happier, more willing to connect with others. She is more considerate and she adds in things when we are talking like, "I wonder if Jesus did this?" and she is a little more willing to help others. She is listening better, too. It's not extreme changes, but I notice them.*
>
> (Camp Wapo parent)

These brief examples show how some of the impacts played out in the lives of specific individuals and their families in the weeks following the camp experience. Two of these parents note that the experience has led to conversations about faith in the home, a clear example of how the impacts extend to the supporting networks. The experience has affected the parent-child relationship in positive ways, with two of these parents specifically stating that their children are more pleasant, considerate, and helpful to others. We can also see examples of increased social skills that result from the relational environment of camp in the Lutherdale camper's respect of confidentiality, the Sugar Creek camper's adherence to polite social discourse, and the Wapo camper's increased willingness to connect with other people. Signs of faith formation are apparent across all three examples, though these signs manifest differently for the unique individuals. The Lutherdale camper is engaging in faith discussions after camp; the Sugar Creek camper is reading her Bible more, and the Wapo camper is intentionally connecting the faith narrative with her own life. All of these examples include connections to multiple characteristics

of the camp model. The Lutherdale camper is more self-confident and independent, which have clear connections to *different from home*. He also wants to maintain confidentiality, which relates to both *camp is relational* and a desire to respect the *safe space* of camp. The comments about faith also connect this example to the *faith-centered* aspect of camp.

These brief examples demonstrate the complexity of the camp experience as it affects each unique individual, but they also show some of the consistency that led researches to the theory of the *camp model* that is detailed in this paper. These findings add depth of understanding to the Christian camp experience that other studies have indicated contributes in significant ways to faith formation and spiritual growth. The *camp model* offers evidence for how and why camp is effective, allowing for consideration of this model in relation to other ministries of the church.

The Camp Model and Christian Outreach

The camp model has specific relevance for outreach ministries. This consideration is particularly important because outreach has been a key reason for the founding of many camping organizations, and it is also an aspect of camping that has led to some of the most confusion in the literature and popular dialogue. Robbins' camp anecdote about the activity designed to make campers cry is not an indictment of the camp model but rather of prioritizing an emotional experience (his "warm fuzzies") without theological reflection or relational follow-through (Robbins, 26). His point is that faith is not formed or sustained through one-off emotional experiences. Put another way, a highly emotional religious experience, even if it is couched as conversion, is not equivalent to outreach. It may be true that some camps build a highly emotional and relational atmosphere throughout the week in order to elicit a specific religious response on the final night. That was evidently the primary goal of some of the earliest YMCA

camps in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Hopkins, 469), and it continued to be a major goal of some in the Evangelical camping movement after World War II (Todd and Todd, 34). However, the final night conversion experience or *cry fest* is far from a universal aspect of Christian camping, and even camps that offer altar calls should not be lumped together as emotionally manipulative. It is important to leave the stereotypes behind and consider the relevance of the camp model revealed in the present study.

A clear limitation of this study is that all three camps are Lutheran camps in Wisconsin, so the question of applicability to other camp types is relevant. It is intriguing that the model that emerged is neither limited to denomination nor place. This is not to say that the faith-centered aspect of these camps was general or generic. On the contrary, the faith teachings and practices of these camps were intentionally Lutheran, and this specificity was important because these camps had strong connections to networks of Lutheran congregations. Pastors and youth workers were present during summer camp because they saw the camping ministries as extensions of their congregational ministries. The camp model that emerged from the study should not be considered a distinctly Lutheran camp model but rather a ministry model that recognizes its place in a vast network of faith formation. It is expected that the specific faith activities and Bible study curricula of non-Lutheran camps would be different from those observed at the camps in this study. Episcopal and Catholic camps may have daily communion and corporate confession. Evangelical and Baptist camps may have altar calls or commitment services during worship services. These specific practices serve to ground the faith-centered nature of the camp in the normative traditions of the participants. The commonality proposed in the camp model is that *camp is faith-centered*, that faith practices, discussions, and consciousness infuse all aspects of

the experience. Camps serve as mission outposts or outreach ministries by means of the connections they forge with the ministries of congregations and homes.

The simple truth is that outreach ministries cannot stand on their own. This is one of the most consistent findings of major youth ministry studies, such as *Sticky Faith* and the NSYR, that examine faith formation from adolescence into adulthood. An assessment of these and other studies suggests that young people need at least three major factors for faith to be sustained long-term: faith-centered relationships, internalization of beliefs, and incorporation of faith into daily living (Sorenson 2014, 28). These three factors are clearly present in the camp model. The overlap of *camp is relational* and *camp is faith-centered* provides the space for faith-centered relationships to form. The overlap of *different from home*, *safe space*, and *faith-centered* offers a chance for camp participants to make the faith their own and safely wrestle with whether or not they believe in God. The overlap of *participatory* and *faith-centered* provides opportunity for campers to live and breathe the faith in the daily rhythm of Christian living. Responses to the parent survey give clear indications that these faith-forming factors do not remain confined to the microcosm of camp, and here is where we see the true value for outreach. Camp participants brought these specific faith-forming factors home with them. Some campers continued the new friendships they formed at camp, while many of the participants went to camp with fellow church members, so they deepened those relationships that continued after returning home. Other campers brought faith conversations and considerations into the relationships they had at home with parents and siblings. The Camp Wapo camper described above demonstrates that the incorporation of faith into daily life continues weeks after she returns home, as her parent notices her asking, “I wonder if Jesus did this?” The camp experience was not only a set-apart event for

these participants. They gained skills that they continued to use and process after returning home. This continuity indicates that the camp model is a compelling example of outreach ministries.

The connections with the ministries of the home and congregations do not negate the significance of the camp experience as an event. In other words, nurture and conversion are not mutually exclusive. The camp model present at these three camps favors nurture because its proponents take the long view of faith formation. However, the experience itself is also very real and very immediate to many of the participants, particularly those who have an experience of conversion, theophany, or simply being brought up short by an encounter they interpret as God at work. Campers should not be compelled or expected to have an emotional experience that is interpreted for them as conversion. Doing so is to play into camp stereotypes and to claim programmatic responsibility for something that is the work of God alone. However, conversion happens at camp. This is not the result of programming but rather the movement of Christ through the power of the Spirit. The camp model provides a container for interpretation, a space for openness to encounters with God, a hyperawareness of Christ's ongoing activity in the world. Camp ministers should not have the expectation of conversion, though they should expect God to show up. Continuity with the faith present in homes and congregations ensures that young people are not left to process these experiences on their own. The Lutherdale parent cited above describes that her son spoke with her "about his faith and questions he had raised" at camp. This camper was given the tools to process his experience after he returned home, in part through the ability he had to ask questions at camp.

The data are compelling that the camp model is effective for faith formation. In terms of outreach ministry, its significance should not be seen as an opportunity for conversion but rather as an opportunity to introduce young people into an ecology of faith formation. Young people

who are new to the faith attend camp with their friends or, in the case of some of the Lutheran camp participants, at the insistence of parents or grandparents that want them to be confirmed or at least exposed to Christian morality. These participants have the opportunity to experience the rhythm of life caught up with and dependent upon the activity of God, and they are given the tools to continue nurturing their faith and processing any experiences (conversion or otherwise) of faith at camp. These tools include Christian relationships, which the data demonstrate continue after the camp experience, Christian faith practices that help them incorporate faith into their daily lives, and points of relational connection with congregational ministries through friends from camp or ministry leaders present at camp.

Ministry leaders have several potential action steps in response to this study. The first is to facilitate increased camp attendance by connecting young people with existing camping ministries. This step alone has tremendous potential to strengthen the faith formation of young people in the ministry leader's care, as well as the families of these young people. The data indicate that the impacts will also extend to the congregational community as young people seek greater involvement and even desire leadership roles. The second action step is to strengthen partnerships between local camping ministries and the leader's ministry. Involvement will give direct buy-in to the camping ministries and help to ensure that there is a degree of continuity between the two ministries. The data show that it is important for the ministries of camp to compliment the ministries of congregations and homes, and the more buy-in local ministers have, the more these important connections are made with such things as shared theology, common faith practices, and even simple things like using the same worship songs. The third action step is for ministry leaders to consider how their ministry can incorporate elements of the camp model.

Many ministry leaders already adopt a version of the camp model when they take groups on adventure trips or weekend retreats. The articulation of the model can help them be more intentional during these ministry opportunities. The model can also be instructive for more typical or regular ministry settings, such as weekly youth group. When considering its relevance, it is important to note that the camp model functions as a whole, so adopting an individual element and hoping for a similar impact is problematic. Combining the elements, however, may provide key aspects of the camp model in very diverse settings. A weekly gathering of a small youth group can serve as an example. Consideration of space is one place to start. Participants can enter a space that is intentionally set apart as safe if this notion of safety is made clear to the group from the beginning through such things as group covenants and trust building activities. This space can be set apart as different from home and school through rituals like lighting candles, using an opening dialogue akin to the old Christian Endeavor pledges (Senter, 59), or even providing a meaningful object (e.g. a rock or pinecone from camp). The space becomes something different and someplace safe by means of the community present and the rituals that set it apart. Intentional relationships can be formed in these spaces based on mutual trust and centered on faith in Christ. These elements of the camp model combine to provide a special container for this weekly youth group to explore their faith in the limited time frame and space available to them. It is not camp in the strict sense, but many participants who have had camping ministry experiences would certainly recognize it as *camp-like*.

Conclusions and Ongoing study

This paper detailed the findings of the Effective Camp Research Project, a grounded theory study examining the impact of the one-week Christian summer camp experience on the primary participants and their supporting networks. The data indicate that there are positive and

recognizable impacts of the camp experience clustered around five characteristics that the researchers have called the *camp model*. This model exists in highly contextualized forms at different camps and in relation to unique individuals, yet the impacts are remarkably similar. The observed impacts continue affecting participants long after the camp experience is completed, and these impacts extend to their family members, congregations, and others in their supporting networks. The adaptability of the model to various camping contexts suggests that it also might be applicable to ministry in the congregational setting. Its relevance to outreach ministries was briefly considered.

More research is needed to confirm the validity of the proposed model, but this project lays a firm foundation for future research, providing common terminology and dispensing with oft-repeated stereotypes. The finding that the impacts are empirically recognizable is an encouraging sign that a quantitative follow-up study can both confirm the model's validity and assess more definitively what causes breakdowns in the camp experience. This follow-up is currently underway in summer/fall 2016 with six Lutheran camps in Wisconsin, including the original three, and surveying more than 1,200 campers before camp, after camp, and two months following camp. The next step is to expand the study beyond the state of Wisconsin and beyond Lutheran traditions to see if this model is relevant to Christian camping ministry in other theological traditions. It is suggested that other Mainline camping ministries be assessed next, followed by a more robust study of Christian camping in the United States. Other important topics for future research include diverse camping ministry forms, including day camps, family camps, high adventure camps, and multi-week camping experiences.

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