**The Impact of Philosophy and Program Style on Outcomes at United Methodist Summer Camps**

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It is well-established that overnight Christian summer camp experiences have consistent and lasting impacts on participants, including faith salience, ongoing spiritual practices, self-confidence, and leadership. A 2022 survey of campers and parents in a stratified random sample of United Methodist Church (UMC) summer camps confirmed these findings. However, the outcomes were far from universal. Previous research has demonstrated that individual camper experience, tied closely to program quality, greatly impacts the measurable outcomes, but this does not account for all of the differences. Combining the data from the summer camp participants with a separate data stream from camp directors, it is possible to examine the relationship between director priorities and camper outcomes. This paper details the results and explores the implications for camps and other ministry spaces. The study identified three major factors impacting outcomes of the summer camp experience: program priorities, quality of the experience, and supporting networks.

Decades of research have confirmed that summer camps have consistent and lasting impacts on participants. The American Camp Association’s Directions Study used a test-retest methodology that identified measurable impacts in multiple stated outcomes across various types of camps, with indications that much of the growth lasted at least six months after the camp experience.[[1]](#footnote-1) Subsequent research indicated that camps focusing on specific areas of growth, such as spirituality, were generally effective in achieving those desired outcomes.[[2]](#footnote-2) Research focused on Christian camps identified the program characteristics and unique outcomes associated with overnight Christian summer camp, confirming that these outcomes also lasted months after camp.[[3]](#footnote-3) The most robust longitudinal study on summer camp identified program quality as the most important factor influencing camper growth, with an additional factor identified as the importance of a support network (such as schools) that reinforce the lessons learned at camp.[[4]](#footnote-4) Camp research has also differentiated outcomes based on program elements and philosophy.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Methodology**

This research involved secondary analysis of three overlapping datasets, including surveys of camp participants, camper parents, and camp directors from 27 United Methodist camps. The camper and parent surveys were commissioned by United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries (UMCRM) to assess the effectiveness and impacts of their ministries in order to target areas for improvement and promote areas of success. These surveys duplicated the test-retest methodology of the Effective Camp Research Project, surveying the same campers on the first day of camp, the last day, and then sending a follow-up two months after the camp experience.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The goal was to recruit a representative sample of UMCRM summer camps using a stratified random methodology. The research team established a goal of surveying 200-250 overnight campers (ages 10-19) from each of 18 camps. These camps were selected randomly from each of the 5 jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church, in proportion to the number of United Methodists in each jurisdiction. This resulted in the selection of 3 camps in the Northeast Jurisdiction, 5 in the Southeast, 4 in the North Central, 3 in the South Central, and 3 in the West. Several of the selected camps did not serve enough campers to meet the threshold alone, so they were joined with one or two other camps in the same annual conference. The resulting sample of 27 camps were representative of all UMCRM summer camps in terms of camper numbers, annual budgets, and program philosophy.

The first day and last day questionnaires were distributed in paper format to campers shortly after arrival at camp and on the last day of camp. These were modified versions of those used in the Effective Camp Research Project, with updated wording designed for the United Methodist context and refined measurements for the growth indices and assessments of the five fundamentals. The five fundamental characteristics of Christian summer camp emerged from grounded theory research during the first phase of the Effective Camp Research Project (2015). The subsequent survey in phase 2 (2016) was designed to measure these characteristics from the perspective of the campers, with each measurement including 3-4 survey items taken directly from participant perspectives. The five fundamental characteristics include safe space, unplugged from home, faith-centered, participatory, and relational. The three growth indices included measurements of belief (vertical faith), faith relevance (horizontal faith), and self-confidence, each consisting of four survey items included on all three camper surveys. These measurements were repeated at more than 40 camps between the initial study and the UMCRM study in 2022, including minor refinements in each subsequent year. By the time of the UMCRM study, more than 7,000 campers had participated, and the reliability of the measurements was confirmed.

Together, the participating UMCRM camps surveyed 4,573 individual campers, of which 3,471 had matching first day and last day surveys. Of those surveyed on camp, 58% provided contact information for the follow-up survey, which was distributed electronically. This resulted in 681 responses (26% response rate), of which 594 had all three surveys matched. The same camps were asked to distribute an electronic survey to camper parents between one and four weeks following their child’s return from camp. This resulted in 1,242 parents responses. Parent surveys were not matched with camper surveys.

The third overlapping dataset came from a survey of camp directors conducted bi-annually on behalf of Outdoor Ministries Connection, an ecumenical cooperation of several denominational camp and retreat organizations, including UMCRM. This survey tracks statistical data on the Christian camp industry, including participant numbers, staff salaries, and program offerings. It also includes a series of questions about camp priorities and philosophy. All of the camps that participated in the UMCRM Effective Camp Study responded to the director survey in 2022 or 2020, allowing the camp-level data to be combined with the camper and parent responses from the 27 participating camps.

All identifying information for campers and parents was removed from the dataset to protect confidentiality, and the camps themselves were anonymized.

**Comparing Camp Types**

Previous research using the OMC Director Survey delineated four categories of Christian summer camps, based on their level of faith emphasis and connection to congregational partner ministries.[[7]](#footnote-7) These classifications included a complex calculation considering numerous survey variables (13 for congregational connection and 7 for faith emphasis). For example, the congregational connection classification included the frequency of clergy involvement in camp ministries and director agreement level with the statement “Camp worship and programs are designed to get participants more excited about and engaged in their home congregation” (5-point agreement scale). Variables included in the faith emphasis classification included agreement level with “Faith formation and practices are incorporated into all aspects of camp life” and the level of importance assigned to “Facilitating participants’ experiences of or encounters with God” (5-point importance scale). The resulting four categories were:

**Nominal:** Those with comparatively low faith emphasis and connection to partner ministries were categorized as nominal camps, indicating that while they are historically Christian and may retain some faith practices, faith is not a high priority in program or philosophy. This camp type is quite rare in UMCRM, representing only 6% of camps. In the study sample, only 1 camp was categorized as nominal (4% of sample).

**Compartmentalized:** Those with moderate or moderately high faith emphasis and moderate levels of connection to partner ministries were categorized as compartmentalized camps, indicating that faith is present and important but not always central to program or philosophy. 46% of UMCRM camps were categorized as compartmentalized in 2022, and they represented 37% of the sample.

**Disconnected:** Those with high or moderately high levels of faith emphasis but low or moderately low levels of congregational connection. These are faith-centered camps that do not have strong connections to congregational partner ministries. Only 11% of all UMCRM camps were disconnected in 2022, and they represented 18% of the sample.

**Faith-Integrated:** Those with high or moderately high levels of faith emphasis and high or moderately high levels of congregational connection. These camps have faith integrated into their programs and maintain strong connections to their congregational partners. 37% of UMCRM camps were categorized as faith-integrated in 2022, and they represented 51% of the sample. It is notable that 2022 was an outlier in the proportion of faith-integrated camps. UMCRM camps categorized as faith-integrated were 49% of the total in 2018 and 52% in 2022, nearly identical to the sample proportion.

**Findings**

The dataset as a whole confirms the findings from the Effective Camp Research Project that the Christian camp experience has consistent positive outcomes on camper faith and wellbeing, and much of this growth persists months after the camp experience. This demonstrates the reliability of the measurements in the project. Like the initial study, UMCRM campers in the random sample exhibited lasting growth in the three indices (belief, faith relevance, and self-confidence). Campers showed evidence for statistically significant growth in 18 of the 19 individual items that were measured on the first day and last day surveys with a 5-point agreement scale. When measured across all three surveys, campers showed evidence for significant on-camp growth that remained significantly higher through the follow-up survey in 11 of the 19 survey items (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Changes in Camper Responses to Identical Survey Items on the first day of camp (t1), last day (t2), and 2-3 months after camp (t3)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **n** | **T1 Mean** | **T2 Mean** | **T3 Mean** | **DM T2-T1** | **t val****T2-T1** | **DM T3-T2** | **t val****T3-T2** | **DM T3-T1** |
| God created the world. | 486 | 4.47 | 4.46 | 4.44 | -.003 | -.138 | -.023 | -.740 | -.027 |
| I know that I can make friends. | 502 | 3.91 | 4.09 | 4.09 | .175 | 4.821\*\*\* | .008 | .218 | .183\*\*\* |
| Worship services are usually boring. | 457 | 2.61 | 2.40 | 2.64 | -.210 | -3.827\*\*\* | .245 | 4.491\*\*\* | .035 |
| I am good at solving problems with a team of people. | 498 | 3.83 | 3.94 | 4.04 | .112 | 2.680\*\* | .100 | 2.533\*\* | .213\*\*\* |
| I believe the Holy Spirit is active in the world | 479 | 4.41 | 4.48 | 4.48 | .075 | 2.396\*\* | -.004 | -.138 | .071\* |
| Regular worship attendance is important for my faith | 471 | 3.64 | 3.71 | 3.76 | .074 | 1.978\* | .045 | 1.165 | .119\*\* |
| When I meet someone who looks or acts different from me, I want to get to know them | 471 | 3.86 | 4.04 | 4.00 | .178 | 4.728\*\*\* | -.045 | -1.151 | .134\*\*\* |
| I have important things to offer the church and the world. | 439 | 3.86 | 4.01 | 4.13 | .153 | 3.691\*\*\* | .112 | 2.539\*\* | .264\*\*\* |
| Faith in God helps me in my daily life. | 462 | 3.98 | 4.10 | 4.17 | .121 | 3.679\*\*\* | .063 | 1.740\* | .184\*\*\* |
| I like going out of my comfort zone and trying new things. | 507 | 3.56 | 3.91 | 3.86 | .347 | 7.856\*\*\* | -.043 | -.970 | .304\*\*\* |
| I feel confident in my ability to be a leader | 490 | 3.77 | 4.05 | 4.14 | .282 | 6.718\*\*\* | .090 | 2.171\* | .371\*\*\* |
| When something bad or frustrating happens, I have trouble bouncing back | 493 | 2.91 | 2.80 | 2.91 | -.108 | -2.181\* | .114 | 2.159\* | -.006 |
| I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. | 478 | 4.44 | 4.48 | 4.48 | .040 | 1.406 | .006 | .216 | .046 |
| Being in nature helps me feel closer to God. | 465 | 4.01 | 4.15 | 4.09 | .133 | 3.312\*\*\* | -.058 | -1.443 | .075\* |
| The Bible is the word of God | 471 | 4.41 | 4.43 | 4.41 | .013 | .414 | -.017 | -.537 | .004 |
| I have Christian friends I can turn to in times of need. | 478 | 4.06 | 4.09 | 4.26 | .029 | .667 | .172 | 3.787\*\*\* | .201\*\*\* |
| When I grow up, I plan to participate in the life of a church/congregation. | 441 | 3.88 | 4.01 | 4.00 | .129 | 3.155\*\*\* | -.007 | -.175 | .122\*\* |
| I am happy about my life and who I am. | 500 | 4.31 | 4.38 | 4.37 | .076 | 2.202\* | -.014 | -.373 | .062 |
| I enjoy spending time helping those in need | 494 | 4.51 | 4.53 | 4.52 | .024 | .848 | -.010 | -.322 | .014 |

*\* Asterisks indicate that the t statistic was significant at the level of p<.05 (\*), p<.01 (\*\*), and p<.001 (\*\*\*)*

**Factor 1: Program Priorities**

Program priorities, as reported in the OMC director survey, had significant impacts on camper experience and outcomes. The camp typology proved a reliable categorization when considering faith-related outcomes. Multiple analyses from both the parent and camper surveys confirmed that the camps categorized as faith-integrated had consistently higher faith-related outcomes than the other camp types. This was especially the case when comparing them to the compartmentalized and nominal camp experiences.

The campers at faith-integrated camps reported higher levels of satisfaction with the faith-centered elements of camp and greater frequency of faith practices compared with those from compartmentalized and nominal camps. They agreed significantly more that they enjoyed “when we studied the Bible,” the worship time, the music/songs, and “time spent alone or in silence.” It is notable that there were no significant differences in enjoyment of camp experiences not directly related to faith, including the counselors, spending time in nature, and the camp experience as a whole. This indicates that the faith-integrated camps offered a more enjoyable experience in program areas specifically related to faith. Campers at faith-integrated camps also reported significantly more frequent conversations about God and faith with their cabin mates (45% indicated these conversations happened “often” or “almost always,” compared with 35% at compartmentalized and nominal camps).

On the last day of camp, campers at faith-integrated camps agreed significantly more with the statements “My questions concerning faith were taken seriously” (t1347, 1360=3.070, p<.01), “I learned more about God” (t1482, 1547=4.372, p<.001), and “I was strengthened in my faith” (t1401, 1488=5.123, p<.001) compared with campers from compartmentalized and nominal camps. There were no significant differences in agreement with most items not directly related to faith, such as “I had a lot of fun” and “I had opportunities to lead.” There were no significant differences in agreement with the faith-related items when comparing campers at faith-integrated camps with those at disconnected camps, suggesting the major differences in perceptions related to learning about God and growing in faith were related to the degree that faith was emphasized, not the connection to partner congregations.

Comparing matched responses confirmed that growth was more consistent at faith-integrated camps, and it also showed some differences with disconnected camps. These differences are shown in Figure 2. The first thing that is evident is that campers at all three camp types showed significant growth in multiple variables. However, there were clear differences among them. Considering only those items that showed significant change at the level of p<.01, campers at compartmentalized/nominal camps showed significant positive growth in 12 of the 19 variables, campers at disconnected camps in 8 of 19, and campers at faith-integrated camps in 16 of 19. Not all of the differences among the camps were directly related to faith. For example, faith-integrated campers were the only ones who showed significant growth in “I am good at solving problems with a team of people” and “I am happy about my life and who I am.” However, there were important differences that could be predicted by camp type. Campers at faith-integrated camps were the only ones to show significant growth in “I have Christian friends I can turn to in times of need,” “I believe Jesus rose from the dead,” and “I enjoy spending time helping those in need.” Campers at faith-integrated camps showed significant growth in all three survey items directly related to church engagement (“Regular church attendance is important for my faith,” “I have important things to offer the church and the world,” and “When I grow up, I plan to participate in the life of a church/congregation”). Campers at disconnected camps showed no significant change in these three items, offering compelling evidence that prioritizing connection with church partners directly impacts camper outcomes related to congregational engagement.

Figure 2: Comparing the Changes in Camper Agreement from First Day to Last Day Among 3 Categories of Camp

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Nominal and Compartmentalized Camps** | **Disconnected Camps** | **Faith-Integrated Camps** |
| **Question** | **n** | **T1 avg.** | **T2 avg.** | **t val.****T2-T1** | **n** | **T1 avg.** | **T2 avg.** | **t val.****T2-T1** | **n** | **T1 avg.** | **T2 avg.** | **t val.****T2-T1** |
| God created the world | 1260 | 4.26 | 4.24 | -1.00 | 609 | 4.41 | 4.44 | .996 | 1260 | 4.52 | 4.54 | 1.25 |
| I know that I can make friends | 1327 | 3.94 | 4.12 | 7.37\*\*\* | 635 | 3.92 | 4.04 | 3.48\*\*\* | 1280 | 3.78 | 4.03 | 10.20\*\*\* |
| Worship services are usually boring | 1166 | 2.66 | 2.51 | -4.17\*\*\* | 579 | 2.69 | 2.48 | -3.76\*\*\* | 1180 | 2.63 | 2.43 | -5.20\*\*\* |
| I am good at solving problems with a team of people | 1307 | 3.83 | 3.87 | 1.53 | 626 | 3.82 | 3.84 | .34 | 1263 | 3.73 | 3.87 | 4.80\*\*\* |
| I believe the Holy Spirit is active in the world | 1234 | 4.22 | 4.28 | 3.01\*\* | 607 | 4.36 | 4.47 | 3.49\*\*\* | 1243 | 4.41 | 4.50 | 4.96\*\*\* |
| Regular worship attendance is important for my faith | 1206 | 3.43 | 3.51 | 3.29\*\*\* | 572 | 3.57 | 3.55 | -.38 | 1233 | 3.67 | 3.75 | 3.33\*\*\* |
| When I meet someone who looks or acts different from me, I want to get to know them | 1237 | 3.80 | 3.90 | 3.80\*\*\* | 598 | 3.87 | 3.99 | 3.44\*\*\* | 1213 | 3.77 | 3.92 | 5.54\*\*\* |
| I have important things to offer the church and the world. | 1122 | 3.72 | 3.88 | 5.28\*\*\* | 555 | 3.84 | 3.91 | 1.49 | 1149 | 3.76 | 3.97 | 7.22\*\*\* |
| Faith in God helps me in my daily life | 1198 | 3.74 | 3.87 | 5.22\*\*\* | 576 | 3.88 | 3.97 | 2.09\* | 1208 | 3.96 | 4.08 | 4.99\*\*\* |
| I like going out of my comfort zone and trying new things. | 1319 | 3.64 | 3.89 | 8.63\*\*\* | 632 | 3.64 | 3.88 | 5.63\*\*\* | 1284 | 3.44 | 3.81 | 12.45\*\*\* |
| I feel confident in my ability to be a leader | 1285 | 3.80 | 3.99 | 6.67\*\*\* | 610 | 3.79 | 3.97 | 4.35\*\*\* | 1247 | 3.69 | 3.90 | 8.11\*\*\* |
| When something bad or frustrating happens, I have trouble bouncing back | 1277 | 2.88 | 2.80 | -2.54\*\* | 602 | 2.90 | 2.74 | -3.35\*\*\* | 1259 | 2.91 | 2.85 | -1.84\* |
| I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. | 1203 | 4.20 | 4.25 | 2.28\* | 578 | 4.41 | 4.45 | 1.39 | 1218 | 4.52 | 4.57 | 2.60\*\* |
| Being in nature helps me feel closer to God. | 1169 | 3.77 | 3.89 | 4.21\*\*\* | 584 | 3.80 | 3.97 | 3.98\*\*\* | 1204 | 3.87 | 4.10 | 7.79\*\*\* |
| The Bible is the word of God | 1204 | 4.17 | 4.21 | 1.87\* | 579 | 4.33 | 4.38 | 1.74\* | 1201 | 4.43 | 4.45 | .933 |
| I have Christian friends I can turn to in times of need. | 1197 | 3.85 | 3.91 | 2.27\* | 577 | 3.82 | 3.88 | 1.49 | 1227 | 3.94 | 4.03 | 2.98\*\* |
| When I grow up, I plan to participate in the life of a church/congregation. | 1108 | 3.60 | 3.73 | 4.54\*\*\* | 524 | 3.72 | 3.81 | 2.16\* | 1143 | 3.85 | 3.99 | 4.94\*\*\* |
| I am happy about my life and who I am. | 1310 | 4.36 | 4.39 | 1.32 | 610 | 4.42 | 4.41 | -.41 | 1264 | 4.17 | 4.33 | 6.47\*\*\* |
| I enjoy spending time helping those in need | 1296 | 4.32 | 4.35 | 1.15 | 603 | 4.37 | 4.42 | 1.61 | 1264 | 4.36 | 4.44 | 4.09\*\*\* |

*\* Asterisks indicate that the t statistic was significant at the level of p<.05 (\*), p<.01 (\*\*), and p<.001 (\*\*\*)*

Parent survey responses confirmed the differences identified in the camper surveys. Parents of campers attending faith-integrated camps agreed significantly more with the statements “My child was strengthened in faith” (t437, 385=2.829, p<.01) and “My child learned more about the Bible” (t431, 367=2.139, p<.05) compared with those from compartmentalized camps (there were no parent responses from the single nominal camp in the study). Like in the camper survey, there were no significant differences in agreement with survey items not directly related to faith, such as “My child had fun at camp,” “My child made a new friend,” and “My child grew in self-confidence.”

There were also clear differences in parent observations of faith practices in the weeks following camp. Parents were asked to offer a simple yes/no response to whether they observed specific changes in their children that had been previously identified in the qualitative research of the Effective Camp Research Project. In comparison to compartmentalized camps, parents from faith-integrated camps were 2.1 times more likely to indicate that their child had shown greater interest in attending church, 1.5 times more likely to indicate that their child engaged them in conversations about God and faith more frequently, 1.8 times more likely that their child asked to lead the family in prayers at mealtimes more frequently, and 2 times more likely that their child was reading the Bible more frequently. When comparing faith-integrated parents with disconnected parents, the only one of these four showing a significant difference was greater interest in attending church, in which case faith-integrated parents were 1.4 times more likely to identify this change. Once again, this difference in reported outcomes makes sense when considering the difference between faith-integrated and disconnected camps.

The lasting change evident in the camper survey was more difficult to differentiate based on camp type. Those that exhibited growth during the camp experience (measured in the first day and last day surveys) tended to maintain that growth through the follow-up survey. There were no significant differences identified among the camp types in terms of campers maintaining the growth they experienced or returning to pre-camp agreement levels. Differences were also calculated based on a separate item in the director survey: level of importance placed on “Facilitating participant faith formation following completion of the camp or retreat program.” Participants at camps whose director indicated this was only “somewhat” or “not very important” tended to show lasting change in the same survey items as those at camps whose director indicated this was “very” or “extremely important,” suggesting no differences in outcomes based on this priority.

Campers responding to the follow-up survey reported only minor increases in the frequency of four faith practices, in comparison with the months before camp. This was surprising, since previous research using the Effective Camp methodology and survey instruments indicated significant growth in personal prayer, family prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance. Because the overall changes in these practices were small in the UMCRM dataset, it was difficult to determine differences based on camp type. The small differences evident between faith-integrated and compartmentalized camps were non-significant.

These findings indicate that program priorities comprise a significant factor in camper outcomes. UMCRM camps that prioritized faith as central to their programming tended to have greater impact on camper faith than camps that compartmentalized faith from other programming. The greater impacts included a variety of faith measurements, including belief in Christian statements (e.g. Jesus rose from the dead), perceptions that faith is worthwhile or important in their lives, connection with Christian community, and faith practices away from camp (as reported by the parents). Additionally, camps with a strong connection to congregational partner ministries tended to have greater impacts on positive perceptions of congregational ministries and frequency of church attendance following camp compared with camps that were largely disconnected from congregational ministries. While these differences were compelling, effect sizes were generally smaller than those associated with two other factors: camper experience and camper network support.

**Factor 2: Quality of the camper experience**

The last day camper survey contained numerous items assessing the quality of the experience from the camper’s perspective. These included general questions about whether they had fun, liked the food, and wanted to come back, along with questions designed to assess the five fundamental characteristics of Christian summer camp. Each of the characteristics was scored according to an index created and validated through the Effective Camp Research Project, indicating whether the characteristic was robust or had evidence for a breakdown for each camper. 61% of UMCRM respondents had no indications of a breakdown in any of the 5 characteristics, while 27% had evidence for a breakdown in one, and the remaining 12% had a breakdown in two or more. Comparing these groups reveals the importance of quality camp experiences for camper outcomes.

Those with breakdowns in two or more characteristics showed no evidence for growth in any of the 19 variables measured on the first day and last day of camp, on average. Three of the 19 showed statistically significant declines among this group: “God created the world” (t316=-2.802, p<.01), “I am good at solving problems with a team of people” (t331=-2.822, p<.01), and “I have Christian friends I can turn to in times of need” (t308=2.179, p<.05). Additionally, this group showed a significant decline in the faith relevance index, with non-significant declines in both belief and self-confidence. Those with no indications of breakdowns showed statistically significant growth in all 19 of the individual variables and all three growth indices.

Camper experience, as measured according to the five fundamental characteristics, had a larger effect on camper outcomes than camp type. Campers with robust experiences at compartmentalized camps showed much more consistent growth than campers with evidence for breakdowns at faith-integrated or disconnected camps, indicating that program quality mattered more than program philosophy. It was clear that a camper could have a faith-centered experience at a compartmentalized camp or a disillusioning faith experience at a faith-integrated camp.

There were some differences in the quality of the experience among the different camp types, though the only significant differences were related to the faith centered characteristic. As noted above, campers at compartmentalized camps had significantly less average agreement that they enjoyed the faith-centered aspects of camp (e.g. Bible study) and had fewer faith related conversations with their cabin mates than campers at faith-integrated camps. These experiences impacted their score for the faith centered characteristic. Campers at compartmentalized or nominal camps were 1.6 times more likely to show evidence for a breakdown in faith centered compared with faith-integrated campers, but there were no significant differences in breakdowns in the other four characteristics.

A breakdown in the characteristics of camp did not always mean that campers interpreted the experience poorly. In fact, 72% of those with measured breakdowns in two or more of the characteristics agreed that they had a lot of fun at camp (significantly lower than the 98% of those with no measured breakdowns who agreed). In terms of impacts, the breakdowns mattered more than the reported fun. Those with measured breakdowns in two or more of the characteristics who agreed that they had a lot of fun showed no growth in the three indices, with numerical (though non-significant) decline in both belief and faith relevance. Those with no measured breakdowns who disagreed that they had a lot of fun showed statistically significant growth in faith relevance, along with six of the individual variables (remarkable, considering there were only 50 of these individuals in the entire sample, lowering the possibility for statistical significance).

Breakdowns in the camper experience had different impacts based on camp type. At faith-integrated camps among campers with a breakdown in two or more characteristics, there were statistically significant declines in faith relevance. At compartmentalized and nominal camps, there was no change in any of the three indices among those with two or more breakdowns. This suggests that the consequences for breakdowns in the camp experience were faith-related when faith was at the center of the experience.

Among campers with no breakdowns measured, both faith-integrated and compartmentalized/nominal camps showed evidence for statistically significant growth, but the growth tended to be higher at the faith-integrated camps, with t-values higher in 17 of the 19 individual variables. This indicates that both program quality and program philosophy impacted camper outcomes.

**Factor 3: Network support**

The final factor impacting camper outcomes can be summarized as network support. Campers attended camp for different reasons, and they came from a variety of backgrounds. Some had robust spiritual, emotional, and social support at home and school, while others did not. Some were highly engaged in a local church, while others were disengaged. These factors greatly influenced their perceptions of camp and the outcomes.

Pre-camp experiences predicted incoming faith and self-confidence measurements to a high degree, and they also predicted reported outcomes. Campers who were highly engaged in church arrived at camp with much higher measurements of faith, and they also tended to show more consistent evidence for growth. The same can be said for those with high levels of faith engagement in the home, such as frequent conversations with their family about God/faith and frequent prayers with their family.

These differences based on camper experiences outside of the camp environment made it difficult to isolate differences in lasting outcomes. Those with the highest levels of support at home and church came in with the highest levels of faith measurements. These campers tended to be the most motivated to attend camp in order to grow in their faith, have the most positive camp experiences, report that they grew in their faith, and respond to the follow-up survey. However, the changes based on the camp experience were difficult to measure because their incoming measurements left little-to-no room for growth. Among campers with strong and supported faith in the home and actively engaged in church (categorized based on incoming survey responses), 79% had the highest possible average on the belief index and 30% had the highest possible on the faith relevance index. These campers showed statistically significant growth in only 9 of the 19 growth variables, though 95% agreed that they were strengthened in their faith. This strongly suggests a type 2 error, with the existing measurements inadequate to measure growth that campers themselves were reporting. This meant that the follow-up survey was not able to accurately differentiate the impact of supporting networks on maintaining growth measured during the camp experience. However, the data strongly suggest that robust supporting networks at home and church are closely associated with higher camper faith measurements and higher self-reported faith outcomes.

Campers attending faith-integrated camps tended to have more faith support in the home and be more active/engaged in congregational ministry than those attending compartmentalized or nominal camps. This was evident in both the camper and parent surveys. Almost three-quarters of parents (71%) from faith-integrated camps indicated attending church with their children multiple times per month or weekly with their children, compared with 53% from compartmentalized camps and 59% from disconnected camps. Both parents and campers also indicated greater interest in learning more about God and growing in faith. 95% of parents who sent their children to faith-integrated camps indicated that “to grow in faith and learn more about God” should be a “very” or “extremely important” priority at camp, compared with 83% from compartmentalized camps. Among campers, 76% of those attending faith-integrated camps agreed that they came to camp (at least in part) “to learn more about God and grow in my faith,” compared with 66% from compartmentalized/nominal camps. These motivations and supportive networks impacted camper growth.

When controlling for incoming motivation to grow in faith and church engagement, campers showed roughly equal growth in faith measurements at integrated and compartmentalized camps, and there were no significant differences in agreement with growing in faith or learning more about God. This indicates that those who came to camp intending to grow in faith tended to leave with the perception that they grew, regardless of camp type. On the other hand, those who did not agree that they came to camp to learn about God and grow in faith showed significant differences based on camp type. Those with lower motivation who attended faith-integrated camps agreed significantly more, on average, that they were strengthened in faith, enjoyed the Bible studies, and enjoyed the worship times. However, they had significantly less agreement with “I liked/enjoyed the whole camp experience.” In short, those who were not motivated to learn about God and grow in their faith tended to have less positive experiences if they went to faith integrated camps than if they went to a compartmentalized camp. This is an intriguing finding, since some campers indicated that they felt forced to attend camp.

The role of the supporting network in camper growth was clearly complex and stubbornly difficult to measure. One survey item is illustrative of the complexity. For the item “Regular worship attendance is important for my faith,” those who indicated attending church at least sometimes (more than 1-2 times this year) grew significantly from the first day to the last day and maintained the growth at follow-up. Those who attended only 1-2 times that year or not at all showed no growth in this variable, even though they had the greatest potential for growth in this measurement. This suggests that growing in the understanding that regular worship attendance is important for faith requires prior experience of regular worship attendance. Camp only had the positive impacts for those who already attended at least occasionally, and these impacts lasted months after camp, presumably with the support of ongoing attendance at the local church.

**Discussion and Areas for Further Study**

This study brought together three overlapping datasets in order to assess factors related to camper outcomes, building on research conducted at both secular and Christian camps over the past two decades. This study confirms many of the findings from previous research. First, Christian camps consistently demonstrate positive and lasting outcomes related to belief, faith relevance, and faith practices, alongside outcomes common across the summer camp industry (such as self-confidence). Second, program priorities influence camper outcomes. Third, camp is not a standalone ministry that makes something out of nothing. It is, as Rob Ribbe has stated, a temporary community that operates alongside and in partnership with permanent spaces, such as church and home.[[8]](#footnote-8) Fourth, program quality, as experienced by each individual camper, impacts camper outcomes. The uniqueness of this study is considering these elements alongside one another.

The factors influencing camper outcomes overlap in complex ways. On the one hand, it appears that program priorities matter a great deal, even when considering camps that are otherwise remarkably similar. Integrating faith into all programs and intentionally connecting with partner ministries predicted increased camper outcomes, from both the camper and parent perspectives. However, this factor of program priorities is closely associated with camper and parent motivation. Those who attended faith-integrated camps were much more likely to indicate that they were motivated to attend in order to grow in faith. Increased motivation to grow in faith also predicted increased camper outcomes related to faith. Therefore, the increased faith outcomes at faith-integrated camps could be related to more effective programing, the success of these camps in recruiting families that were primed to grow in faith, or a combination of these factors. The data strongly suggest that the two factors were complementary, but more research is needed to differentiate the effects of motivation and program priorities on camper outcomes.

The UMCRM campers in this study showed only modest growth in faith practices in the weeks and months following camp, while campers from camps in previous years of the study showed more robust growth in these practices. More research is needed to determine whether this represents a shift in efficacy, an anomaly related to the timing of the study, or a difference specific to UMCRM summer camps.

The study was conducted in 2022, which was the first summer of normal programming for many camps following disruptions in the previous two years caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the findings, particularly the elevated levels of breakdowns in the five fundamental characteristics, could be unique to this time period. Additionally, the United Methodist Church was in a time of uncertainty related to the delay of their general conference, in which they faced a divisive vote related to the welcoming of LGBTQ+ persons. This may have impacted camp-church relations and the degree to which camps identified with the teachings of their denomination.

The study was limited to United Methodist summer camps. This allowed for comparison of camps that were remarkably similar in terms of program, clientele, and program priorities. While this allowed for more reliable differentiation based on camp type by controlling for numerous other variables (such as denomination), it also limited the scope and generalizability of the study. More research is needed with other Christian denominations to confirm and refine the findings. The inclusion of Christian traditions with larger proportions of nominal and disconnected camps would broaden the understanding of differences based on camp type, since the vast majority of UMCRM camps are faith-integrated or compartmentalized.

This study offers compelling evidence for the impact of program priorities and philosophy on camp outcomes. UMCRM camps with leaders who prioritize incorporating faith into all aspects of camp rather than compartmentalizing it from other programs and prioritize partnerships with congregational ministries have more consistent outcomes on camper and family faith. Faith-integrated camps appear to set the expectation for both parents and campers that they will grow in their faith, and they are more successful than their peers in influencing desired outcomes related to faith. The partnership also influences congregational ministries by impacting camper engagement with the local church and frequency of family church attendance. The findings make clear that nothing is more important for camper outcomes than program quality. By focusing on improving program quality, keeping faith at the center of their ministries, intentionally partnering with local churches, and attending to the camper’s supporting network at home and church, Christian camps can positively impact the faith outcomes for campers and their families.

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3. Jacob Sorenson, “The Fundamental Characteristics and Unique Outcomes of Christian Summer Camp Experiences,” *Journal of Youth Development* 13 (2018), 183-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bryn Spielvogel, Robert Warner, and Jim Sibthorp, “National Camp Impact Study 2017-2022 Final Report,” American Camp Association, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Sorenson, The Fundamental Characteristics, JYD, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This typology is detailed in: Jacob Sorenson, *Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camp in Theological Perspective* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rob Ribbe, “Redefining Camp Ministry as Experiential Laboratory for Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development,” *Christian Education Journal* 9 (2010), 144-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)