Similarities and Differences in Ministry Priorities Among Mainline and Evangelical Summer Camps

Jacob Sorenson, PhD

Abstract

Christian summer camp became an integral part of Christian faith formation in America in the 20th century, developing two streams of practice along Evangelical and Mainline Protestant lines. The camp movement has proven remarkably durable and consistently impactful on faith formation. The two streams of Christian camp have continued to diverge along ideological lines, leading to more antagonism than cooperation. However, recent surveys of camp directors in both Christian traditions reveal remarkable similarities amidst their disagreements, illuminating a way forward for mutual respect and collaboration.

Introduction

Christian summer camp has been an integral part of the ecology of faith formation in North America since its emergence in the late 19th century. It is often misunderstood and maligned among youth ministry scholars[1] and secular camp professionals,[2] in spite of its strong track record of success in building character, faith, and crucial life skills.[3] Perceptions of camping ministry, whether positive or negative, are frequently based on anecdotes or isolated cases, rather than scholarly inquiry. This paper will examine new research that reveals the shared

[1] See, for example, Mark Devries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 154 and Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 197.

[2] Eleanor Eells, *History of Organized Camping: The First 100 Years* (Martinsville, IN: American Camping Association, 1986), 66.

[3] Jacob Sorenson, "The Fundamental Characteristics and Unique Outcomes of Christian Summer Camp Experiences," *Journal of Youth Development* 13 (2018), 183-200.

priorities and unique strengths of Christian camping ministries that can help chart a way forward for these vital ministries of the church.

Recent surveys of camp directors in the Christian Camp and Conference Association (CCCA) and Outdoor Ministries Connection (OMC) reveal the perceptions and ministry priorities of these leaders. The reality is that Christian camps vary widely in their philosophy of ministry and desired outcomes. These differences are most apparent when comparing camps affiliated with Mainline Protestant denominations (OMC) with those aligned with American Evangelicalism (CCCA). However, there are also many similarities that clarify the most consistent priorities and strategies of these ministry spaces. Most importantly, a comparison of their responses indicates that each group can learn from the strengths of the other in order to benefit the ministry of the whole church.

Two Streams of Christian Camp Ministry

The nascent summer camp movement emerged in late 19th century New England, Southern Canada, and the upper Midwest, as part of a new youth movement that accompanied the rise in compulsory public education following the Civil War and the subsequent elimination of the summer term. The earliest camps had two main strategies of delivering the gospel message that reflected debates in the church: dramatic conversion and Christian nurture. The former was associated with the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries, which included the popular camp meetings in rural America throughout the 1800s. The camp meetings, which focused primarily on adult conversion, were important antecedents to the summer camp movement, particularly the stream focused on dramatic conversion. In fact, many camps were founded on the sites of camp meeting grounds. They included large public rallies featuring prominent speakers and calls to individual repentance and profession of faith, elements that have carried

over to large sectors of Christian summer camp in the Evangelical tradition. In contrast, the Christian nurture movement, exemplified in the work of Horace Bushnell, envisioned a process of Christian education in which, "The child should grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."[4] This approach focused on deep, ongoing relationships and small groups. Early summer camps followed these two streams, with some emerging as ongoing educational ministries of local congregations or youth societies (such as Christian Endeavor, the Epworth League, or the Luther League) and others as locations for dramatic encounters with God and mechanisms for conversion.

In the early summer camp movement, nearly every camp was overtly religious. They thrived in association with the fresh air and back-to-nature movements, along with the frequent incorporation of the tenets of muscular Christianity. The most influential early camps were privately owned and generally catered to upper class children, linking the notion of manliness with rugged living in the outdoors and the instilment of Christian morality.[5] This began to change dramatically in the years following the First World War, as public education was disentangled from Christianity. The summer camp movement came of age during this period, as attendance topped 1 million campers per summer in the 1920s and 2 million the following decade.[6] Charles Eliot, the former president of Harvard University famously proclaimed in 1922, "The organized summer camp is the most important step in education that America has given the

[4] Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture*, 10.

[5] The most well-known of these was Camp Chocorua, founded by Ernest Balch, the son of an Episcopal minister, in 1881. See Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York University Press, 2008), 37.

[6] Paris, 62-63.

world."[7] But the movement was proceeding on a secular path, along with public education, prompting the formation of distinctly Christian camps.

Camps that most exemplified the conversion approach in the first decades of the movement were those affiliated with Christian associations, most especially the YMCA. As extensions of the YMCA, these early camps catered to lower- and middle-class children, and they were overtly evangelical in their programming.[8] But this began to change in the 1920s and 1930s, as the YMCA and other agency camps began deemphasized Christian teachings. Private camps followed suit, leaving Christian education to camps that were overtly affiliated with church groups. Prior to World War II, these camps were few in number, but that changed dramatically in the post-war years.

Christianity thrived in America in the post-war years, in part as a response to the red scare of communism. American flags appeared at the front of churches, and a 1954 joint resolution of congress mandated that the motto "In God We Trust" appear on all currency. This period saw a dramatic increase in church attendance, accompanied by an expansion of Christian summer camps. In response to the increased secularization of private and agency camps, Christian denominations expanded their camp programs and new Christian agencies began summer camps with an overt focus on Christian evangelism. Foremost among these agencies was Young Life, which founded its first summer camp in 1945. This period also saw the formal alignment of the two streams of camping ministry, exemplified in the early strategies of conversion and Christian nurture.

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[7] Paris, 238.

[8] C. Howard Hopkins, *History of the Y.M.C.A. in North America* (New York: Association, 1951), 469.

The streams coalesced along the ideological lines of Mainline Protestantism and American Evangelicalism. The Mainline Protestant denominations had emerged from the European Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries. They were the core of the ecumenical movement of the 20th century that led to the formation of conglomerate denominations like the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and United Church of Christ, all formed from disparate predecessor bodies. They are "mainline" in the sense that their history can be traced back through the ecumenical movement, the Reformation, the Medieval Catholic Church, and the early church's seven ecumenical councils to the apostolic church. As part of the 20th century ecumenical movement, Mainline denominations joined together in the National Council of Churches (NCC) in 1950, with a united emphasis on Christian charity and promoting social justice. In recognition of the importance of camp ministry, the NCC formed a Camp and Conference Committee in the year it was founded.

In contrast to Mainline Protestantism, American Evangelicalism eschews much of church history and tradition in favor of harkening back to the apostles and the biblical narrative. It is largely a 20th century movement, with historical antecedents in other great evangelical movements, including the First and Second Great Awakenings, as well as the Anabaptist movement of the European Reformation. The Evangelical emphasis on individual conversion experiences coincides with the movement's ethos of breaking from the historical narrative in favor of a more direct connection to God. In contrast, the Mainline tends to emphasize the continuity of God's action through systems and traditions, coinciding with a greater emphasis on religious instruction and Christian nurture. As Mainline traditions were coalescing into the NCC, Evangelical camping leaders formed affinity groups in the 1950s that eventually combined to form the Christian Camp and Conference Association (CCCA) in 1963.

Both streams of camp ministry thrived in parallel through the 1960s, and their different priorities are apparent in the literature. A CCCA-endorsed manual in 1963 said about Evangelical camps, "Their supreme and conscious aim is to see each camper won to Christ in a definite, personal, religious experience, whether it be in a public service, in a private counseling session, or alone in a quiet woods."[9] In contrast, a 1969 manual about church camp written on behalf of the NCC was much more aligned with the Christian nurture approach: "The purpose of church camping is the same as that of the church: that all persons may respond to God in Jesus Christ, grow in daily fellowship with him, and meet all of life's relationships as children of God."[10] For the Mainline, camp was an extension of the church's educational ministry, a supplement to programs like Sunday school and confirmation.[11] For Evangelicals, it was an "effective delivery system" for the gospel message and a means for conversion.[12]

The Mainline ecumenical movement began to falter by the turn of the 21st century, as denominations began to splinter over social issues (most prominently, acceptance of same-sex marriage and LGBTQIA+ clergy). The NCC eliminated funding for a variety of ministries, including the Camp and Conference Committee. Leaders of the disparate denominational camp and conference associations responded in 2014 by forming a loose partnership known as the Outdoor Ministries Connection (OMC). While the constituent denominational associations met annually or bi-annually, OMC gathered all affiliated camp and conference leaders for their first "Great Gathering" in 2019. CCCA holds similar conferences annually.

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[9] Floyd Todd and Pauline Todd, *Camping for Christian Youth: A Guide to Methods and Principles for Evangelical Camps* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 34.

[10] Robert Pickens Davis, *Church Camping* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969), 12.

[11] Richard Osmer and Kathryn Douglass, *Cultivating Teen Faith: Insights from the Confirmation Project* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 67-88.

[12] Mark H. Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 220.

The Landscape of Christian Camp Ministry

Since its founding in 2014, OMC has conducted a bi-annual survey of affiliated camp and retreat center directors in order to survey the landscape of Christian outdoor ministries. This survey has revealed certain trends among the Mainline traditions, along with their shared priorities and philosophies of ministry. Since the 1990s, CCCA has also conducted a survey for its membership in order to provide benchmarks for comparison in terms of program, budget, and employee compensation. In 2020, CCCA aligned the survey more closely with the OMC survey by incorporating identical survey items assessing philosophy and ministry priorities. This provided comparable benchmarks for both associations immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first post-pandemic surveys were conducted in fall 2022 for OMC and spring 2023 for CCCA, allowing a broad overview of the landscape of Christian outdoor ministries in summer 2022 and following. Along with their many differences, the surveys contained identical items, facilitating direct comparisons. In each case, association leaders distributed an online survey link to their constituents and encouraged participation over the course of several months. Each participating camp or conference center director was asked to complete the survey on behalf of the entire organization. In cases of more than one respondent from the same organization, only the response from the senior staff member (usually the director or CEO) was retained. This ensured one response for each organization. With permission from the associations, survey results were anonymized and combined into a single data set for the purposes of the research found in this paper. Since CCCA membership is limited to the United States, only OMC respondents from the United States were included in the comparisons (15% of OMC respondents were from Canada).

Christian summer camp is part of a larger industry that includes camps, conferences, and retreat operations. The American Camp Association (ACA) is the nationwide leader in the industry, and most of their services are geared towards secular camps, though about a quarter of their membership is religiously affiliated. Only a fraction of Christian camps (just over half of OMC and fewer than 20% of CCCA) were accredited through ACA, in part because of the differing priorities. ACA serves a wide network that includes agency camps, non-profit camps, and large for-profit camps. Some are medical specialty camps or are exclusively day camps, serving no overnight campers. The Christian camp industry is much more uniform. While some sites are primarily reserved for conferences or adult retreats and a few are primarily day camps, the vast majority operate overnight summer camp for youth, and they are almost exclusively co-ed. Even more specifically, the most common session length by far is one week. Other camps in the industry oftentimes have sessions lasting two, four, or even eight weeks, with young people staying for the entire summer. The quintessential Christian summer camp experience lasts for a single week: 93% of CCCA ministries and 95% of OMC ministries offer week-long summer camp, compared with only about 15% of each that offer multi-week programs and only about a third of each that offer day camp programs. This makes the Christian summer camp experience widely predictable, with few exceptions: children and youth go away from home for 5-7 days and stay with others their own age, along with 1-2 college age staff members who serve as group leaders (or "counselors"). The programs invariably include worship, Bible study or Christian devotional time, singing, and a variety of outdoor group activities.

Christian camps have experienced tremendous turmoil since the turn of the 21st century, when many of their ministries were at historic highs in terms of summer camp numbers. The Great Recession of 2008-9 hit religiously affiliated camps hard, and they were slower to recover

than the rest of the summer camp industry, though they experienced steady increases in camp enrollment over the subsequent decade.[13] On the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic in summer 2019, about 1,500 Christian camps affiliated with CCCA or OMC served more than 1.5 million overnight summer campers.[14] The pandemic had devastating impacts on the summer camp and retreat industries, with a majority of camps closing entirely for summer 2020 and almost all of the remainder forced to limit their capacity.[15] Here is where the director surveys revealed some intriguing differences. Among OMC ministries that operated summer camp, 88% did not offer overnight camp programs in 2020. However, the same was true for only 50% of CCCA ministries. In spite of recommendations from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the American Camp Association (ACA) to the contrary, 9% of CCCA camps operated at full capacity in 2020.[16]

Summer camps were slow to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, with camper numbers in 2022 still below 2019, on average, in both CCCA and OMC. Additionally, the post-pandemic survey revealed a philosophical divide that goes beyond the centuries-old debate between personal conversion and Christian nurture. There are deep political divides evident among camp directors that reflect the culture wars raging in American politics and society. Amidst these clear differences are consistent priorities that define the contours of Christian outdoor ministries and provide common ground for collaboration and mutual learning.

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[13] Jacob Sorenson, *Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camp in Theological Perspective* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021), 41.

[14] These numbers are based on the 2020 surveys of camp directors conducted on behalf of both CCCA and OMC.

[15] Tracey Gaslin, et al, "The Unexpected Positive Outcomes for Summer Camps in the Time of COVID-19," *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 41:1 (2023).

[16] Several of these made national headlines for COVID-19 outbreaks. See, for example, Heather Hollingsworth, Kantele Franko, and Lindsey Tanner, "Summer Camps Hit with COVID Outbreaks – Are Schools Next?" Associated Press, July 12, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/health-coronavirus-pandemic.

Table 1: Camp and Retreat Center Philosophy, in Comparison

Respondents from both CCCA and OMC were asked their level of agreement with the following statements about the philosophy of outdoor ministries. They responded on a scale of 1-5 (1-strongly disagree, 2-somewhat disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-somewhat agree, 5 strongly agree). The table below shows the average level of agreement for each item. Columns show average responses for the CCCA surveys in both 2020 and 2023, along with the OMC surveys in both 2020 and 2022.

	CCCA 2020 *N=154*	**CCCA 2023 *N*=142**	OMC 2020 (USA only) *N=243*	**OMC 2022 (USA) *N*=218**
Our camp exists to lead young people to Christ	4.64	4.73	3.92	3.65
Faith formation/practices should be incorporated into all aspects of camp	4.50	4.44	4.27	4.15
Our camp emphasizes summer staff as much as camper formation	4.47	4.46	4.31	4.04
Camp is a place to unplug from technology	4.32	4.42	4.25	4.18
Camp worship/programs are designed to get participants more excited about/engaged in home congregations	4.15	4.01	3.99	3.75
It is important for staff and campers to understand the theology and practices of our faith tradition	3.69	3.58	3.98	3.87
The ministry of hospitality is the primary way we proclaim the gospel to guests	3.66	3.52	4.15	4.11
Our camp has a strong focus on nature/creation learning/stewardship	3.59	3.61	3.99	3.84
At camp, specific theology is not as important as general spirituality/belief	3.42	3.27	3.67	3.63

Table 2: Camp and Retreat Center Importance Scale, in Comparison

Respondents from both CCCA and OMC were asked to indicate the importance that their camp places on the following items. They were given an importance scale ranging from 1-5 (1-not important at all, 2-not very important, 3-somewhat important, 4-very important, 5-extremely important). The table below shows the average level of importance assigned to each item. Columns show average responses for the CCCA surveys in both 2020 and 2023, along with the OMC surveys in both 2020 and 2022.

	CCCA 2020 *N=152*	**CCCA 2023 *N*=141**	OMC 2020 (USA only) *N=243*	**OMC 2022 (USA) *N*=218**
Participant safety	4.80	**4.70**	4.86	**4.93**
Fellowship/community building	4.67	**4.69**	4.79	**4.71**
Facilitating participants' experiences of or encounters with God	4.65	**4.59**	4.42	**4.39**
Individual faith formation	4.61	**4.58**	4.35	**4.27**
Developing Christian leaders	4.49	**4.44**	4.18	**4.03**
Fun for all participants	4.36	**4.35**	4.34	**4.35**
Self-esteem/character building	4.28	**4.27**	4.47	**4.42**
Familiarity with the Bible	4.26	**4.36**	3.41	**3.26**
Participating in Christian practices	4.17	**4.10**	4.05	**3.89**
Strengthen/support families	4.03	**4.04**	4.00	**3.90**
Knowledge of and fellowship with creation	3.98	**3.83**	4.19	**4.12**
Facilitating participant faith formation following completion of the camp or retreat experience	3.92	**3.70**	3.59	**3.39**
Taking a stand on moral/ethical issues	3.74	**3.47**	3.55	**3.52**
Strengthen/support congregations	3.59	**3.58**	3.72	**3.63**
Theological instruction	3.54	**3.50**	3.34	**3.27**
Peace and justice awareness	3.19	**2.83**	3.88	**3.80**

Results: Common Ministry Priorities

There were important commonalities among the directors in OMC and CCCA. The top two areas of average agreement (Table 1) among OMC directors were, "Camp is a place to unplug from technology" and "Faith formation and practices should be incorporated into all aspects of camp." These were also in the top 4 areas of agreement for CCCA, demonstrating the importance of being unplugged and the centrality of faith formation at Christian camp.

When looking at the most important priorities according to directors (Table 2), there were several notable commonalities. Safety was the number one priority for both groups, and fun was rated with the exact same level of average importance (in both years of the survey among both groups). Crucially, fun was not rated second to safety. For both groups, it was lower in average importance than several other priorities, a reality that contradicts the common dismissal of camp as "fun and games" or fun activities with a "spiritual gloss."[17] Of course, fun was rated quite highly: 89% of CCCA respondents and 91% of OMC respondents considered it "very" or "extremely important." But directors consistently rated three things as more important. In addition to safety, they regarded "fellowship and community building" and "facilitating participants' experiences of and encounters with God" as more important than fun. This suggests that the common priorities among all Christian camp directors are safety, fellowship/community building, faith, experiencing God, being unplugged, and having fun while doing it.

These common priorities align remarkably well with elements described in Christian camp literature as the "5 fundamentals of Christian camp."[18] These fundamentals include camp as safe space (aligned with director priority of safety for all participants), faith centered (aligned

[17] Senter, 307, Karen Marie Yust, "Creating an Idyllic World for Children's Spiritual Formation," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 11 (2006), 187.

[18] Sorenson, *Sacred Playgrounds*, 63-65.

with incorporating faith into all aspects of camp), camp as relational (aligned with fellowship and community building), unplugged from home (aligned with unplugging from technology), and participatory (aligned with the priorities of fun and facilitating encounters with God). Programs at Christian camps, whether CCCA or OMC, flow out of these common priorities.

Walking alongside the young campers in the traditional week-long programs at almost every Christian summer camp is a group of emerging adult staff, usually employed for the whole summer but sometimes for just a few weeks. These young staff members form the core of the summer ministry team, and the camps also focus their ministry efforts on them. Two-thirds of OMC directors (67%) and 88% of CCCA directors indicated that "developing Christian leaders" was a "very" or "extremely important" ministry priority. Many of them were referring to leadership training programs designed for high school campers (52% of CCCA and 63% of OMC camps offered these programs), but they also prioritized developing their summer staff members. They devoted time and resources to developing these staff, including an average of 10 days of dedicated staff training for OMC and 9 days for CCCA. Directors from both groups widely agreed with the bold statement, "Our camp emphasizes summer staff formation as much as camper formation" (90% agreement among CCCA directors and 75% among OMC). There is strong evidence that the experience of serving on summer camp staff has profound and lasting impacts on participants.[19]

This shared reality leads directly to another commonality: the ongoing challenge of finding high quality summer staff. This challenge became a crisis following the pandemic. Two-thirds of OMC directors (66%) and three-quarters of CCCA directors (77%) reported that their

[19] Jacob Sorenson, "The Role of Christian Summer Camp Staff Experiences in Faith Formation and Leadership Development," *Journal of Youth Ministry* (in print). Rachael G. Botting, Robert E. Ribbe, and Greg Robinson, "Assessing the Impact of Summer Camp Employment on the Development of Workplace Skills," *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership* 13:1 (2021), 82-95.

camps were understaffed in summer 2022. Many had to cancel programs for lack of staff, and others resorted to overfilling cabin groups, running the risk of adversely affecting the camper experience. Each group was asked to name the top threats facing their ministries, and they were univocal: the number one threat indicated by both groups was the staffing shortage.

Results: Areas of Difference

The major differences among CCCA and OMC camps are rooted in the historical differences between Evangelicals and Mainline Protestants, and they are clearly exacerbated in the divisive political climate and culture wars of the 2020s. Though united by the most fundamental and dearly held ministry priorities, these groups seldom work together or share resources. The main historical differences center on the role of camp in faith formation. OMC camps tend toward the Christian nurture model, while CCCA camps tend toward the crisis conversion model.

In practice, this means a dramatic difference in program telos. Though both groups tend to have faith-centered programs and work to facilitate experiences of God, most CCCA camps have an end goal in mind: a personal decision and professed commitment of faith in Christ. The number one area of agreement among CCCA directors was with the statement, “Our camp exists to lead people to Christ.” For OMC directors, this was way down the list, with notably lower agreement than designing programs to get campers more excited about and engaged in their home congregations and understanding the theology and practices of their faith traditions. These latter two statements indicate OMC prioritization of connection with partner ministries over being a center of conversion, a clear preference for the Christian nurture model.

A large majority (87%) of CCCA camps indicated that they encourage personal decisions to follow Christ and recommitments during the camp experience, and a third of camps (34%)

keep track of the number of decisions or recommitments. This practice is almost unheard of at OMC camps, and they have even begun shying away from climactic and emotional final night programs for fear of manipulating their campers. This is in direct response to perceptions of Evangelical camps and the notorious "cry fest" or altar call.[20] The practice has provided some of the primary material for youth ministry scholars to dismiss camping ministries as theologically shallow (even dangerous),[21] and the 2006 Oscar-nominated documentary *Jesus Camp* caricatured the practice for the general public. Aversion to this method and the accompanying fear of being manipulative or causing spiritual trauma has led many in the Mainline Protestant traditions to overcorrect by being non-directive in their faith instructions, even becoming hesitant to share the faith. This may explain why their prioritization of facilitating experiences of God has remained high, while individual faith formation has gradually slipped as a priority (it fell below fun, on average, for the first time in 2022, following a progressive decline).

Ideological alignment has led to deeper divisions in recent years, accompanying the decline in public discourse and the deep entrenchment of the culture wars. This is most apparent in the survey items with the highest level of difference between OMC and CCCA directors: peace and justice awareness and familiarity with the Bible. Reliance on the Bible as the word of God is a hallmark of Protestant theology, dating back to the Reformation emphasis of *sola scriptura* and the translation of the biblical texts into the vernacular. However, biblical hermeneutics have split along ideological lines, with the Evangelical movement doubling down on a broadly literal interpretation in response to modern biblical scholarship. The Bible itself is

[20] Articles in popular publications regularly lambast this practice. For a recent example, see Casey Clark, "What happens at Bible Camp? From 'Cry Night' to Shaping 'Godly Women," Yahoo!Life, February 3, 2023, https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle.

[21] See Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 24 and Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 181.

weaponized in the culture wars. In response to its weaponization, some in the Mainline traditions have begun to deemphasize the authority of scripture in subtle or overt ways, leading to even deeper divides that are evident in the director survey. CCCA directors rated "familiarity with the Bible" as higher in importance than fun. It was not unimportant for OMC directors, but the differences were dramatic: only 43% rated familiarity with the Bible as "very" or "extremely important," compared with 86% of CCCA respondents. Notably, this priority has declined in importance among OMC directors in recent years, as the culture war has heated up.

The opposite was true for the priority "peace and justice awareness." This has been a priority for Mainline Protestants since the founding of the NCC in the 1950s. The NCC vocally advocated for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s, opposed the Vietnam War, and actively supports the rights of women and immigrants. The term "peace and justice" has become associated with progressive policies, many of which are opposed in Evangelical communities. It is telling that OMC directors prioritized peace and justice awareness significantly higher than familiarity with the Bible. Among CCCA directors, it was the lowest priority listed, with only 24% indicating that it was "very" or "extremely important," compared with 62% of OMC directors.

Other differences were subtler but also clear. OMC camps placed significantly higher priority on knowledge of and fellowship with creation, as well as self-esteem and character building (rated as more important than fun, on average). They were also much more likely to agree that the ministry of hospitality is the primary way they proclaim the gospel to their guests, while CCCA directors placed higher average importance on facilitating participant faith formation following the camp experience. They tended to place the same amount of priority on taking a stand on moral or ethical issues, though it is far from certain that they would be standing

on the same side of these issues. This is particularly clear with advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights. While many camps in OMC are openly welcoming to LGBTQIA+ campers and staff, many CCCA directors identified sexual orientation and gender identity issues among the greatest threats to their ministries (the sixth most frequently cited threat in the survey).

Discussion and Implications

In many ways, the Christian camp community has never been more divided along ideological lines, even as director philosophy aligns remarkably well. Ecumenical dialogue has diminished along with public discourse, embroiling Christian factions in culture wars and partisan politics. They have begun defining themselves by what they are not, leading to deeper divisions. In the face of anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment in the public sphere and among Evangelical leaders, Mainline Protestants have focused on advocacy and welcome for this group, leading to greater entrenchment from Evangelicals and a doubling down on literal interpretation of the Bible. In the face of these deepening divides, the prospect of cooperation is daunting, perhaps even distasteful. Yet, the Bible itself calls Christians to unity (Ephesians 2:11-16, Mark 9:38-41, 1 Corinthians 3).

The reality is that the church needs Christian camp ministry. In a post-COVID-19 world, we need summer camp more than ever. The pandemic exacerbated some of the greatest challenges facing young people, including social isolation, reliance on devices like cell phones, relationships mediated through screens, and lack of physical activity. These factors, along with the notable decline in public discourse, have accelerated the mental health crisis.[22] Concurrently,

[22] Megan McDonnell Busenbark, "The Pandemic's Lasting Effects on Kids," Children's Hospital Association, July 2022, https://www.childrenshospitals.org/news/childrens-hospitals-today/2022/07/the-pandemics-lasting-effects-on-kids.

church attendance and religious engagement have continued to decline across Mainline and Evangelical traditions, while religious disaffiliation has accelerated.[23]

Camp is not a panacea, but it meaningfully addresses all of these concerns. Summer camp is one of the last places in existence where young people set aside their electronic devices for more than a few hours at a time, and they report that they love the tech-free time![24] These tech-free environments are highly relational, facilitating face-to-face encounters with people from different backgrounds and building social skills.[25] Additionally, they are highly participatory, active spaces, where young people engage in physical activity and are given a meaningful say in the experience. Though they may differ in theology, Christian camps are consistent in incorporating faith into all aspects of their programs and making space for experiences of God. These experiences serve as catalysts for ongoing understanding that faith matters in life, and they consistently prompt increases in Christian practices in the months following camp, including church attendance.[26] Evangelical and Mainline camps can collaborate on their promotion of the camp experience for what they all agree are its fundamental characteristics: safe, relational, unplugged from home, participatory, and faith-centered.

In terms of their differences, camp leaders can seek rapprochement rather than resentment. Instead of defining themselves by what they are not, they can lift up their common values and learn important lessons from the strengths of their perceived antagonists. The long-

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[23] Pew Research Center, "How U.S. Religious Composition Has Changed in Recent Decades," September 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades.

[24] Sorenson, "Fundamental Characteristics."

[25] American Camp Association, "Directions: Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience" (Martinville, IN: ACA, 2005), https://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/resource_library/report-directions-youth-development-outcomes.pdf.

[26] Sorenson, "Fundamental Characteristics."

simmering debate of conversion versus nurture is a false dichotomy. Both approaches are biblical. Exclusive or undue focus on decisions and commitments to Christ can lead to unsure footing for discipleship (as with the seed sown upon the rocky soil in Mark 4:5-6) or concerns about manipulation so common in popular media (as noted above). Additionally, there is evidence that these decisions made in the camp environment do not have lasting impacts.[27] However, summer camp is an incredibly effective space for spiritual transformation, and those in Mainline traditions can acknowledge the value of helping young people give words to their religious experiences. This may take the form of testimony, rather than a formulaic commitment, but the practice remains an important part of faith formation and transmission.[28]

Wisdom from the Mainline traditions affirm the importance of cultivating faith formation and Christian discipleship over a lifetime through Christian nurture. Too often, Evangelical camps operate as if the decision for Christ were the telos rather than a new beginning for Christian formation. Rob Ribbe, one of the most prominent Evangelical camp scholars, critiques this approach and encourages a shift away from emotional moments of decision toward lifelong discipleship.[29] Though OMC camps have begun drifting away from their close partnerships with congregational ministries, these remain important to their ministry priorities. Strengthening these partnerships can reinforce the faith-centered experiences of camp and help young people incorporate a deeper faith into their lives away from camp. The experience cannot end with the last tearful goodbye.

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[27] Sarah Schnitker, et al, "Virtue Development Following Spiritual Transformation in Adolescents Attending Evangelistic Summer Camp," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 33 (2014), 22-35.

[28] Amanda Drury, *Saying is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 50, 82.

[29] Rob Ribbe, "Redefining Camp Ministry as Experiential Laboratory for Spiritual Formation and Leadership Development," *Christian Education Journal* 9 (2010), 144-61.

Finally, camp directors can intentionally choose to opt out of the culture wars that are shedding light on some of the worst tendencies of Christians: hatred, infighting, and exclusion. These conflicts and the accompanying entrenchment on singular issues have turned countless people off to Christianity, in general. This is not to say that camp leaders should ignore important social issues but, rather, that they should not seek to define themselves by what they oppose. CCCA directors could learn the importance of prioritizing peace and justice rather than dismissing these important Christian values. OMC directors could reaffirm the importance of familiarity with the Bible for Christian faith and life. This does not mean agreeing with Evangelical hermeneutics, but it does mean proclaiming the centrality of scripture for assessing Christian theology and continuing to ground their actions, however different they are from their Evangelical counterparts, in scripture.

Perhaps Christian camp directors can begin a renewed relationship in the same way that they proclaim in their ministries: shared experiences in face-to-face interactions. Their camps bring together people from different backgrounds. Perhaps they can follow suit and work to find common ground for the sake of the church.