

THE CAMP-PARISH RELATIONSHIP:
A PARTNERSHIP IN MINISTRY

by

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Abstract:

Camps and parishes exist as partners in ministry, each with unique opportunities and gifts to extend the other's ministry while serving the body of Christ. As members of one body, every camp or parish contributes either to the health or ruin of the camp-parish relationship. The relationship between camps and parishes requires continuous nourishment through communication and support. Working together as partners not only enhances each ministry, but it also increases the understanding and value that camps and parishes have for each other. Camps and parishes, as members of the body of Christ, share a wondrous and binding responsibility for partnership.

Preface:

This paper analyzes the relationship between camp and parish ministries. In response to a void in today's literature regarding this subject, the author sought to collect data and information by means of a survey and personal interviews. The goals of this research project were to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between camps and parishes and to discover opportunities for improving the camp-parish relationship. The survey was developed by the author through conversation with Rev. Mark Anderson (Synod Ministries Specialist, Northeastern Iowa Synod of the ELCA). The survey questions primarily focus on the relationship between camp and parish ministries with regards to programming. Survey recipients were camp directors, pastors, and ministry specialists within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). The follow-up interview questions were developed based on survey responses, covering both a general perspective of the camp-parish relationship as well as specifics of how the camp-parish relationship is played out on a more practical level.

THE CAMP-PARISH RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between camp and parish ministries originates from a common commitment to the gospel. “God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them.”¹ Camps share with congregations a theological base and purpose, for people to “see and understand the fullness of Christ.”² At the basis of the camp and parish relationship is trust in a shared Christian heritage and mission. “Every member serves the whole body, contributing either to its health or to its ruin, for we *are* members of one body not only when we want to be, but in our whole existence. This is not a theory, but a spiritual reality...”³ The health of the camp-parish relationship depends greatly upon both camps and parishes, to work together as partners in extending each other’s ministries.

According to the Outdoor Ministries’ mission statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), “outdoor ministries...serve the whole church...Primarily in partnership with congregations.”⁴ In order for camps to extend the ministry of parishes, camps should support the congregations from which campers originate. For the relationship between camp and parish ministry to be mutually beneficial, “open dialogue on the part of both parties” must take place.⁵ As with human relationships, however, the relationship between camp and parish ministries remains fluid and fragile, requiring continuous nurture, communication, and trust.⁶

Camps and parishes, as partners in ministry, each have unique roles in serving the body of Christ. Churches play a central role in the day-to-day, year round ministry to the people of their congregations. Unlike camps, churches have the opportunity to teach and nurture the faith of a wider generational spectrum, including entire families, in ongoing relationships. The nature

of congregational ministry is a connection with people in the community in which they live, rather than in a community set apart from society, as is common with camping ministry.

Parishes play a vital role in the ministry of each camp, “serving as a link between people and camps.”⁷ Therefore, it is crucial that churches “know the value of their outdoor ministries and are willing to invest in them—then the sky’s the limit with regard to partnership.”⁸ Churches are an important source of financial support, and “need to continue to keep the needs of the camp in front of the (congregation).”⁹ Providing people of the congregation with an opportunity to give financially to camps, both directly and through fundraising, will instill in them a sense of mission and a feeling of ownership in the camp. For example, one church held a hog roast fundraiser to help cover the cost of a camp’s new dining hall. Not only did this benefit the camp, but it also gave the members of the congregation a sense of ownership in a specific, tangible part of the camp’s ministry. It is very important for church pastors (and/or other church members) to advocate camps, whether it’s emphasizing the importance of outdoor ministry through sermon illustrations or sharing the financial needs of the camp with the church board or the congregation.¹⁰ By frequently recognizing the value of camping ministry, a camp’s vision is shared and owned as broadly as possible.

Churches provide critical support to a camp through promoting its programs and sending people to the camp, as campers, staff, and volunteers. Parishes can advocate camp involvement by backing youthⁱ financially to attend camp by giving scholarships, as well as through providing fundraising opportunities. It is important that churches cover the cost of sending adults to camp with their youth as well. Some churches also encourage youth to work at camp by offering a stipend to their summer salary.¹¹

ⁱ While this paper often refers to campers as “youth,” the author recognizes the benefits of camping ministry for the whole congregation.

“The most important thing churches can do to improve upon and enhance the relationship with outdoor ministries is GO—get on site as often as possible and participate in the year round life of the camp.”¹² Churches need to “take ownership of camp seriously.”¹³ One practical way that parishioners of all ages can gain ownership in a camp is through doing work projects, such as trail clearing and construction, or even “adopting” a building at the camp and taking physical and financial responsibility for its upkeep. The relationship between camp and parish ministry is a relational partnership. “Camp should be more than just a place where people stay. That’s what hotels are for. Camp should be an ongoing community...Part of developing this community feeling is getting people interested in and excited about the life of the camp.”¹⁴ Getting church members on site as much as possible, whether it be for a retreat, synod event, or workday, will enhance the congregations’ sense of ownership in the camp.

The extent to which a camp’s programming is extended beyond the confines of the camp greatly depends “on the congregation’s efforts to integrate the two experiences.”¹⁵ The parish has the opportunity to follow through on camp experiences in a variety of ways. By having a “camp Sunday,” where youth that attended camp take part in planning and leading worship, the parish encourages youth to incorporate their newly discovered gifts and enthusiasm for ministry into the life of the congregation. By including songs, skits, and experiences from camp in the worship service, the youth also educate the congregation on the substance and value of camping ministry. In turn, a “camp Sunday” is also a valuable tool in initiating intergenerational conversation.

One important connection between camp and parish ministry resides in adults that attend camp with their youth, whether pastors, youth directors, or lay members of their congregations. Adults function as “‘bridges’ between camp and parish,”¹⁶ connecting “camp staff and parents

and congregations.” These adults know the youth “and can help the camp staff serve their needs.” They also play an important role as observers in being able to tell the camper’s parents and the congregation what has happened at camp.¹⁷ The actual role of adults at camp varies significantly, but regardless of their role, their presence is important. The current trend is a shift away from a leadership role towards a support role, in which they assist camp counselors with discipline, homesick campers, health issues, and crowd control. Even if adults view themselves as chaperones, their potential impact on the youth as “high caliber adult role models”¹⁸ is substantial.

Camp-parish liaisons, or “camp cheerleaders,”¹⁹ can fill an important role in the camp-parish partnership. The camp liaison is someone who realizes the power of camps to enhance and extend the ministry of the congregation and works to increase the quality and quantity of communication between the two ministries. They act as an intermediary, communicating camp information with the parish and personally encouraging registration. After the camper’s return, the camp liaison can follow up by debriefing the campers and collecting feedback and evaluation from campers and their parents, communicating their findings back to the camp. The feedback of congregations will assist camps in modifying programming to meet the needs of its parishes more effectively. Communication of churches can be an important source of new ideas, as well as congregational needs and desires. In order for a camp to be effective in extending the parish’s ministry, parishes must be proactive in communicating with camps.

Camping ministry fills an important ministerial niche that enhances and extends the ministry of the parish. The camp provides a physical place, separated from society, where the distractions of one’s daily life are largely diminished. In the camp’s intentional Christian community, Christian peers, enthusiastic Christian leaders, and an intense schedule of Christian

programming surround youth. The safe environment of camp allows youth to take risks, both physically and spiritually. The intensive faith experiences often encountered at camp “allow people to see and feel life in new dimensions,” encouraging them to “open their hearts to a new way of thinking and living.”²⁰

The programming that camps provide is often unique in style and intensity from a church’s programming. Camps have the advantage of a *daily* schedule that includes worship, reflection, and inspiration. The time intensive nature of camp programming is also unique from the parish setting; in one six-day program week, approximately eighty-five waking hours are spent in structured and supervised camp experiences. It would take almost one and a half years of a program that meets once or twice a month for several hours to equal the time spent in one week of a residential camp.²¹

A camp experience offers a plethora of benefits to the parishioners served. “Camps help young people discover and explore their talents, interests, and values.”²² The nature of the camp experience also enhances a child’s growth and development. “Camps offer unique opportunities for children to succeed” in developing self-esteem through belonging, learning, and contributing; these opportunities for self-development augment home, school,²³ and parish experiences. Camp teaches youth to “problem-solve, make social adjustments to new and different people, learn responsibility, and gain new skills to increase their self-esteem...”²⁴ Even the relatively short, weeklong programs of a camp have a positive effect on the self-constructs of youth, which enable individuals to develop a “stronger personal foundation” while cultivating personal habits, resulting in a healthier lifestyle.²⁵

Camping ministry is complimentary to the ministry of the parish. “The nature of camp develops concepts of Christian community, strengthen(s) youth groups,” and “matures church

leadership at all levels. Church programming is reinforced by camp experiences.”²⁶ “Churches send their youth to camp to learn and grow in faith,” and they hope in return that these young people will “participate in church beyond confirmation.”²⁷ Attending camp provides many youth with confidence to take the faith that they learned in church and implement it in their daily lives. As a result, the returning campers inject something new and fresh into the congregation. “Churches want their youth to see and feel and taste (the Holy Spirit), to get it all over them, so to speak, so they can bring it home and give new life to the congregation.”²⁸ Camping ministry reinforces the parish by confirming its teaching while inspiring lives of faith and igniting “the spiritual fire within.” Congregations “recognize that camping offers experiences and interaction kids can’t get anywhere else...”²⁹

The camp’s communication with parishes is critical in maintaining a healthy relationship. It is the camp’s responsibility to inform churches of the camp’s programming (and vice versa). Sharing details of the summer theme and program with churches well in advance allows congregations the option of incorporating the camp’s theme into their own programs, such as Sunday School, youth group, or Vacation Bible School. Also, camps can support parish ministry by making past program materials, such as music, games, icebreakers, and skits available to congregations. If not actual material, camps can provide information as to the resources that they used.³⁰ In return, camps can receive feedback and other program ideas from churches by initiating this communication. As one camp director commented, camp-parish partnership means that “we all don’t have to reinvent the wheel. It would help (camps) and churches if they would work more closely.”³¹

While it is the church’s responsibility to build on camp experiences, camps can provide a church with valuable tools with which to incorporate and build upon the camp’s themes and

programming. One example is sending a letter outlining camp themes, music, skits, and activities to each parish following its camp attendance. The letter would also include a personalized section completed by camp staff at the end of the week, referencing specific experiences that youth from the church had, such as a comical performance in the talent show. This information would be invaluable, to pastors, youth directors, or camp liaisons, in opening doors to conversation about camp.³² A camp can also offer follow up materials that are useable in a church's youth group or confirmation program, such as a set of Bible studies, activities, and questions that connect with the summer's theme. The latter approach, however, would be more time consuming to develop, and perhaps it would work best to co-develop it in partnership between camp, parish, and synod.

One prominent aspect of the camp-parish relationship is financial support. It is the camp's responsibility to communicate its financial needs to congregations and "to invite people into giving to something that matters to them."³³ Camps can also include churches in their ministry by scheduling volunteer opportunities, including work days as well as customized projects tailored to a specific congregation's talents and interests. In order for the parish to be willing to invest in camping ministry, however, they must first know the power that camping ministry has to extend their own ministry. A personal visit and invitation by camp staff "goes a mile with a congregation."³⁴

The level of camp-parish communication needs to go beyond superficial mailings and e-mails and include face-to-face conversations. "There is still untold value in the word-of-mouth information about the camp."³⁵ For camp staff, this requires being proactive partners in ministry—going to churches and having fellowship with their members. In addition to building relationships and communicating camp needs and programs, information can be acquired as to

what the congregation needs and wants in camp programming.³⁶ Camps “are best able to serve congregations when they know their congregations.”³⁷ As well as actually visiting churches, camps can build relationships with churches by communicating with key individuals within congregations (previously mentioned as “camp liaisons”), sharing camp information and receiving feedback on previous programming and camp experiences.

“A relationship is not made by dropping off brochures, putting people on mailing lists, or even through phone calls. Relationships which establish trust and commitment come through time together.”³⁸ By building relationships with the people of congregations, “relationships change from ‘paying customer’ to ‘guest’ or ‘friend.’”³⁹ One way that camps can encourage camp-parish relational growth is through encouraging (or even requiring) parishes to send adults to camp with their youth and incorporating these adults into the daily life and programming of the camp. In addition to hosting congregational events at the camp, camp staff can also lead off-site programs at parishes during the camp’s off-season.

It is crucial that camp staff include churches in the program planning and evaluation process as much as possible. Jon Skogen, Associate Director of ELCA Outdoor Ministries, states: “camps are encouraged to use a needs-based approach to program development. Through this, they contact congregations to find out what it is the congregations want or need from the outdoor ministry organization.”⁴⁰ While program committees and boards of directors represent a number of specific parishes in the planning process, their involvement represents only a limited scope of the parishes that use camps. Ideally, a camp’s program is developed in response to the actual needs of the congregations that utilize its programs.

Realistically, it is not possible to have parishes involved in every detail of program development, and the depth of representation by a camp’s constituent congregations varies

significantly. From a general, macro perspective, a Lutheran camp's program represents its parishes if it reflects "the ethos and theology" of Lutheran tradition⁴¹ and functions as a Christian community "through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ."⁴² It is permissible for the camp staff to develop and write the programming independently of congregational involvement as long as it extends the ministry of the congregations that it serves. In some cases, camps may be in a better position than parishes to determine what parishes need in camp programming. The camp staff is also in the position to creatively brainstorm new program ideas or implement ideas observed in other outdoor programs.⁴³

The macro representation view relies heavily on the trust of constituent congregations in the competency of the camp, as well in the camp's shared mission and theology. From a parishioner or camp director with this perspective, there is no need for finite coordination of curriculum and worship between parish and camp experiences, for "the camp experience is by definition an away game."⁴⁴ Camp programs, while independent of those of the congregation, are "helpful and inspirational."⁴⁵ One danger of a camp becoming too independent in program development is a lack of accountability to its constituent parishes. It is essential that the camp's programming is relevant and functions to enhance the ministries of the parish. Another problem resulting from a lack of communication and input may be a shallow relationship between camp and parish, more closely resembling a customer/service provider relationship than a true partnership in ministry.

As a church's input decreases, its sense of camp ownership and involvement will likely decrease as well. Using a needs-based approach to program development, however, requires extra effort, especially for camp staff, making it more difficult for camps operating with a small number of core staff to use. One way for a camp to broaden its base of congregational input is to

have camp board members contact constituent parishes,⁴⁶ communicating with a network of congregational camp liaisons and church staff. Another method is to have an annual review day towards the end of staff training, where the camp invites pastors and parish members to review the summer's programming and share their input. Since the relational health between camp and parish ministry depends largely on communication, program input and conversation will deepen the camp-parish relationship. While it is ultimately the camp's role to provide programming, congregational input will enhance the quality and relevancy of the camp's programming to the needs of the parish.

Camps and parishes exist as partners in ministry, each with unique opportunities and gifts to extend the other's ministry while serving the body of Christ. The camp-parish relationship requires continuous nourishment through communication and support. Working together as partners not only enhances each ministry, but it also increases the understanding and value that camps and parishes have for each other. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, "Every member serves the whole body, contributing either to its health or to its ruin, for we *are* members of one body not only when we want to be, but in our whole existence."⁴⁷ Camps and parishes, as members of the body of Christ, share a wondrous and binding responsibility for partnership.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*. In *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 5, ed. by Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr. (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1996), 36.

² Jerry Manlove and Mary Kettl, *A Common Book of Camping: Reflections and Learnings on Outdoor Ministries* (Jerry Manlove, 1996), 134.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 92.

⁴ ELCA Outdoor Ministries Home Page. <<http://www.elca.org/dcm/camps>>.

⁵ Jon Skogen, Associate Director of ELCA Outdoor Ministries, Chicago, Illinois, survey by author.

⁶ Rev. Susan Debner of Glenwood/Canoe Ridge Lutheran Church, interview by author, 1 November 2003, Decorah, Iowa.

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- ⁷ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 135.
- ⁸ Rev. Susan Debner, survey by author.
- ⁹ Rev. Stephen Anenson of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Story City, Iowa, survey by author.
- ¹⁰ Debner, survey.
- ¹¹ Rev. Dennis Johnson of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, interview by author, 8 November 8 2003, Marion, Iowa.
- ¹² Debner, survey.
- ¹³ Loren Teig, Executive Director of Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Bible Camp, Amery, Wisconsin, survey by author.
- ¹⁴ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 146.
- ¹⁵ Debner, survey.
- ¹⁶ Jerry Manlove, retired Director of Outdoor Ministries, ALC, survey by author.
- ¹⁷ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 136.
- ¹⁸ Jim Wiinanen, Director of Development and Risk Management at Wilderness Canoe Base, Grand Marais, Minnesota, survey by author.
- ¹⁹ Dale Goodman, Director of EWALU Camp and Retreat Center, interview by author, 10 November 2003, Strawberry Point, Iowa.
- ²⁰ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 24.
- ²¹ Cornell Cooperative Extension: 4-H Youth Development, "Benefits of Organized Camping for Youth." <<http://www.cce.cornell.edu/4h/About4-H/4-Hcamps/benefit.html>> 9 October 2002.
- ²² American Camping Association (ACA), "Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience: A 2001-2003 Research and Training Project of the American Camping Association." <<http://www.acacamps.org/research/grant.htm>> Press Release on the Research Project, 29 October 2001.
- ²³ Steve Brannan, et. al., *Including Youth with Disabilities in Outdoor Programs: Best Practices, Outcomes, and Resources* (Champaign: Sagamore Publishing, 2003), 44.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁵ Paul E. Marsh, *What Does Camp Do For Kids? A Meta-Analysis of the Influence of Organized Camping Experience on the Self-Constructs of Youth*, 1999. Unpublished Master of Science thesis, Department of Recreation and Park Administration, Indiana University, IN. <<http://www.acacamps.org/research/marsh/mtsum.htm>>.
- ²⁶ Goodman, survey by author.
- ²⁷ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 135.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ²⁹ Dave McDermott, Director of Riverside Lutheran Bible Camp, interview by author, 30 October 2003, Story City, Iowa.
- ³⁰ Kathleen Ulland-Klinkner, Director of Youth/Education Ministries at Our Saviors Lutheran Church, New Ulm, MN, survey by author.
- ³¹ Shirley Urie, Co-Director of Camp ALOMA, Prescott, Arizona, survey by author.
- ³² Rev. Mark Dumke of Faith Lutheran Church, interview by author, 8 November 2003, Winona, Minnesota.
- ³³ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 110.
- ³⁴ Debner, interview.
- ³⁵ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 147.
- ³⁶ Adrian Walter, Program Director of EWALU Camp and Retreat Center, interview by author, 10 November 2003, Strawberry Point, Iowa.
- ³⁷ Debner, survey.
- ³⁸ Manlove and Kettl, *Camping*, 86.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.
- ⁴⁰ Skogen, survey.
- ⁴¹ Rev. Nancy Hess, Executive Director of Voyageurs Lutheran Ministry: Camp Hiawatha and Camp Vermilion, Deer River and Cook, Minnesota, survey by author.
- ⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31.
- ⁴³ Dale Goodman, EWALU, interview by author, 10 November 2003.
- ⁴⁴ Rev. Steven Jacobsen of First Lutheran Church, Decorah, Iowa, survey by author.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Rev. Stephen Anenson of Immanuel Lutheran Church, interview by author, 30 October 2003, Story City, Iowa.
- ⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 36.

Numerical Survey Results: Camp-parish Relationship in Regards to Programming

Survey by author, completed November 2003

Cumulative Survey Results:

Survey Question	Number of Responses	Average Response
1	39	5.46
2	39	5.03
3	38	4.16
4	32	6.22

Results of Surveys Completed by Pastors:

Survey Question	Number of Responses	Average Response
1	16	5.09
2	16	4.91
3	15	3.17
4	10	6.80

Results of Surveys Completed by Camp Directors:

Survey Question	Number of Responses	Average Response
1	21	5.88
2	21	5.26
3	21	4.98
4	20	6.15

Results of Surveys Completed by Others (not Pastors or Directors)

Survey Question	Number of Responses	Average Response
1	2	4.00
2	2	3.50
3	2	3.00
4	2	4.00

