

INCLUSIVE OUTDOOR MINISTRIES:  
AN UNTAPPED AGENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

by  
Jonathan Schack

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Inclusive outdoor programs have proven beneficial on the positive development of individuals and communities, as well as in propagating positive social change. Given first that research demonstrates the wide variety of benefits of inclusive classrooms and outdoor programs and, second, that the theology of Christian communities supports inclusive programming, Christian outdoor ministries should be at the forefront of the inclusion movement. Nevertheless, while both the theological beliefs of Christian communities and federal and state legislation support the principles of the inclusion movement, churches and Christian organizations are still the least affected by laws requiring inclusive facilities and programs. Christian camps and outdoor ministries need to become more inclusive of people with disabilities in order to grow stronger as Christian communities, serving and being served by a more diverse population. Through modeling theologically based inclusive practices, Christian camps and outdoor ministries will support and promote the continuation of social and organizational change towards inclusion.

Individuals, regardless of their talents, interests, and values, “share a need for a nurturing environment where they can mature socially, emotionally, intellectually, and morally.”<sup>1</sup> It is a long-standing belief that organized camp programs<sup>i</sup> positively meet the needs and interests of youth while influencing personal growth and development. The positive benefits of camp on an individual’s development have also been proven through research.

Residential camping programs have long been recognized for their positive effect on personal and group development. According to Dr. Peter Scales, senior fellow at the Search Institute, “Camps help young people discover and explore their talents, interests, and values.

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<sup>i</sup> Camping, as defined by the American Camping Association (ACA), is “a sustained experience that provides a creative, recreational and educational opportunity in group living in the outdoors. It utilizes trained leadership and the resources of the natural surroundings to contribute to each camper’s mental, physical, and spiritual growth.”

Kids who have had these kind of (camp) experiences end up being healthier and have less problems which concern us all.”<sup>2</sup> Anecdotal evidence in the form of passionate testimonials by campers and staff suggest that organized camp experiences provide unique benefits that remain with individuals throughout their lives.<sup>3</sup> Parents also offer testimonials to the positive effects of camp on their children’s growth and responsibility, decision-making, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, and citizenship.<sup>4</sup> A 1997 study by the American Camping Association (ACA) indicates that camp directors and parents identify four key benefits of camping on youth development as being (in rank order): self confidence and self-esteem, getting along with others/teamwork, an appreciation for the outdoors/environment, and recreational skills.<sup>5</sup>

Experts in child development also recognize camp’s positive benefits on a child’s growth and development. Dr. Michael Popkin, a family therapist, states: “the building blocks of self-esteem are belonging, learning, and contributing. Camps offer unique opportunities for children to succeed in these vital areas...even beyond home and school...”<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Cowan Johnson, a child therapist and certified camp director, also outlines the positive benefits of a camping experience on youth development: “At camp, children learn to problem-solve, make social adjustments to new and different people, learn responsibility, and gain new skills to increase their self-esteem...”<sup>7</sup>

The findings of Paul Marsh’s in-depth meta-analysis support the hypothesis that organized camping experiences, even relatively short, weeklong programs, have a positive effect on the self-constructs of youth. Enhanced self-constructs enable individuals to develop a “stronger personal foundation” while cultivating personal habits, resulting in a healthier lifestyle. Increased self-esteem promotes increases in beneficial factors such as positive

emotional tone, satisfaction with life, academic achievement, easier adjustments to new environments, and a decrease in the susceptibility to peer pressure.<sup>8</sup>

Research has proven that inclusive outdoor programs have a positive effect on the development of participants with and without disabilities. Despite proven benefits, “opportunities for the inclusion of youth in traditional outdoor programs still appear to be significantly limited in the United States, especially for individuals with more severely disabling conditions.”<sup>9</sup> Statistics demonstrate a steady increase of 8-10% in camper enrollments in the past eight years. In 2001 alone, over ten million youth participated in camp programs at over 12,000 camps in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Although recent studies have proven that inclusive camp programs are beneficial for all participants and state and federal legislation requires camps to offer inclusive programming and facilities, few legitimately inclusive camps exist. Out of 2,200 ACA accredited camps in the United States, about 25% claim to be “*dedicated* to meeting the individual needs of campers with physical, emotional, and cognitive limitations.” Yet, in the year 2000, only 146 of the 2,200 ACA accredited camps, or approximately 6%, were listed under the category of “inclusion/mainstreaming” in the *Guide to ACA Accredited Camps*, only a slight increase since 1997.<sup>11</sup> Researchers for the National Inclusive Camping Practices (NICP) Study reported difficulties in finding summer camps “that were inclusive and employed inclusive practices warranting participation in research.” The numerous camps that considered themselves to be inclusive served very few campers with disabilities, had separate programs for people with disabilities and able-bodied participants, or practiced “backstreaming”—bringing in youth without disabilities into specialized camps for youth with disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

Recent federal and state legislation has increasingly supported and required the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of society. The societal shift towards inclusion “is one of the most significant changes affecting people with disabilities in our country.”<sup>13</sup> The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 greatly extends the civil rights of people with disabilities, and it is considered a benchmark in the inclusion movement. The ADA has been “touted as the most far-reaching civil rights mandate since the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and it has, as its major aim, to greatly increase the opportunity for citizens with disabilities to participate in and experience fuller life opportunities.”<sup>14</sup>

According to the ADA, “The Nation’s proper goals regarding individuals with disabilities are to assure equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.”<sup>15</sup> Title III of the ADA, entitled “Public Accommodations and Services Operated by Private Entities,” specifically dictates that a privately run camp may not deny individuals with disabilities the opportunity to participate or benefit from services or facilities. All privately run camps are included under this legislation *except* camps with religious sponsorship while serving their specific religious groups.<sup>16</sup> The separation of church and state, and the lobbying of churches for a blanket exemption<sup>17</sup> from the ADA cause some to worry that the ADA “will not reach very far into the life of any church or faith community.”<sup>18</sup>

Recent legislation has required public schools and programs to become more inclusive of people with disabilities. Research has proven that inclusive classrooms are beneficial for everyone, including students with disabilities. Similarly, research shows that inclusive classrooms do not negatively affect the developmental progress of youth with and without disabilities. Studies have shown, however, that segregated classrooms limit the potential of

youth with disabilities, ill equipping them for life in an inclusive society. Historically, the types of programs offered by public schools for people with disabilities have emulated the values of society, which have viewed people with disabilities as a deviant minority. Yet, the current model of inclusive classrooms offers society a model for inclusive community life.

The practice of inclusive education in public schools, along with civil rights legislation, are “leading the way for a more diverse and inclusive society.”<sup>19</sup> “Inclusion provides personal and social benefits to all citizens who are afforded opportunities to participate together in common areas of life.”<sup>20</sup> Research shows that inclusion, the full time placement of children with disabilities in general classrooms, offers a plethora of benefits for *all* students. Research also shows that the practice of “special” or segregated classrooms for students with disabilities is often detrimental in the academic, social, and psychological development of students with disabilities.<sup>21</sup>

The practice of inclusive schooling, while demonstrating many benefits, has caused no deceleration of academic progress or harmed the developmental progress of students without disabilities. Research has also shown that inclusion does not affect the levels of allocated or engaged time students receive from their teacher, nor has it caused students without disabilities to acquire “undesirable or maladaptive behavior” from their peers with disabilities.<sup>22</sup>

Segregated classrooms do not prepare students as effectively for life in an inclusive society. Special education provides only limited opportunities for students with disabilities to develop the social skills necessary for increased independence as adults in work and community settings. Segregated programs for people with disabilities too often favor the lowest skill level of the group rather than each individual’s unique skills.<sup>23</sup> A parent whose

child is labeled as having a learning disability, as quoted in *Inclusion and School Reform*, describes the negative effects of separate but “equal” classrooms:

Children of Special Education are children of Small Expectations, not great ones. Little is expected and little is demanded. Gradually, these children—no matter their I.Q. level—learn to cozy in the category of being ‘special.’ They learn to be less than they are.<sup>24</sup>

Segregated classrooms limit the number and type of relationships available to students with disabilities, in effect hindering these students from developing the social and cognitive skills that allow for the development of a social network. “A prerequisite for students developing and maintaining friendships with their peers is that they have *close proximity* and *frequent opportunity* to interact with peers.”<sup>25</sup> In inclusive classrooms, students with disabilities may receive much needed social support from peers in addition to paid adults. Special education “has evolved into a curriculum of exclusion,” which “often fails to instill, and sometimes actively discourages, the ambition and self-esteem essential to success in life. When special education means separate education, it is more of a handicap than a help.”<sup>26</sup>

Parents of students with disabilities report that, upon being placed in an inclusive classroom setting their children made academic, behavioral, and social improvements that they felt would not have occurred otherwise.<sup>27</sup> Students with disabilities are just as likely to engage in positive social interaction as their able-bodied peers, and given the higher levels of contact that an inclusive classroom provides students with disabilities, even students with severe disabilities form “substantially larger friendship networks composed primarily of students without disabilities.”<sup>28</sup> Friendships give students with disabilities the opportunity “to develop, practice, and maintain a variety of communicative, cognitive, and social-emotional skills.”<sup>29</sup> In addition they provide support, nurture, and positive role models. Positive experiences and

acceptance by able-bodied peers assist students with disabilities in developing improved attitudes, social competence, and self-esteem.

Inclusive classrooms also result in many positive benefits for students without disabilities. One result of increased contact, and thus increased levels of interaction of able-bodied students with students with disabilities, is a greater appreciation for human diversity. Accompanying this increased level of comfort and awareness is a reduced fear of human differences. Further benefits for students without disabilities include improvements of self-concept and self-esteem, growth in social cognition, development of personal principles, and a greater responsiveness to the needs of other people.<sup>30</sup>

Inclusive education is rooted in a philosophy of equality that values diversity within the human community, respecting and celebrating differences as valuable opportunities for learning. In recognizing the inherent worth of the individual, the idea that children have to be “normal” to contribute is abolished. Students and teachers are “liberated from the tyranny of earning the right to belong.”<sup>31</sup> All students in an inclusive classroom “benefit from a strong foundation of skills necessary to live successfully in a diverse, global community.”<sup>32</sup>

The nature of programs offered by public schools makes a statement about the type of people that our society values, reflecting the attitudes and beliefs of our country. Historically, the treatment of students with disabilities has paralleled the treatment of other minority groups that have been excluded from society, including people of different ethnic origins and religions, and women. The current movement towards inclusion in public schools is the reflection of a gradual societal shift. R. Funk, founder of Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, offers a connection between societal values and the education system, as quoted in *Inclusion and School Reform*:

The myriad of disability-specific programs and policies, the segregation of disabled people, the inability to gain access to organized society, to experience an integrated and adequate education, to obtain meaningful employment, and to socially interact and participate (have) resulted in a politically powerless and diffuse class of disabled people who are unable to coalesce with other groups of disabled people on common issues, to vote, to be seen or heard. This class has accepted the stigma and cause of second-class citizenship and the incorrect judgement of social inferiority.<sup>33</sup>

The creation of inclusive classrooms is a step towards the creation of an inclusive society.<sup>34</sup> If people with disabilities “are segregated, are treated as alien, as different in a fundamental way, then (they) will never be accepted as full members of society. This is the strongest argument against special schools and against separate provisions.”<sup>35</sup> People with disabilities need to be respected as *people* first and foremost, with attention given to individual differences and needs. Inclusive programs will not only prepare people with disabilities for living in an inclusive society, but society will in turn be more prepared for including people previously labeled as “deviant” into everyday life.

The prevalent model in our public schools is inclusion, and “it is proposed that this model (of inclusion) should also be emulated in our nation’s camps and outdoor/environmental education programs.”<sup>36</sup> Despite the proven benefits of inclusion, in school programs as well as in residential camp programs, opportunities for youth with disabilities to participate in traditional outdoor programs and camps are significantly limited. Although many youth with disabilities interact on a daily basis with their able-bodied peers, their summer camp experiences are far too often limited to segregated camps for people with disabilities. While specialized camps serving people with specific disabilities may offer the unique opportunity for people with disabilities to interact with peers that have the same type of disability, the hindrances of specialized or segregated camps are similar in many ways to those of special

education. Segregated camps may be more of a handicap than a benefit in the personal development and inclusion of people with disabilities in a diverse society. Camps and outdoor programs need to further emulate the societal paradigm shift towards inclusion.

Inclusive outdoor programs offer the same benefits aforementioned regarding inclusive educational programs. However, inclusive outdoor programs offer many additional and unique benefits to their participants. Because of the unique attributes of residential camping on the development of youth, inclusive camp programs are very effective agents in propagating youth development for all participants. Several aspects of residential camp environments make them unique in their capacity to contribute to youth with disabilities, including time intensive programs utilizing small group sizes, simplified community life, opportunities to successfully meet individual challenges, and experiential learning opportunities. As a result, inclusive outdoor programs are effective in triggering a cycle of ongoing positive development and social change within their participants and staff.

Organized camping is a very time intensive program; 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.<sup>37</sup> The time intensive nature of camping strengthens its capacity to positively affect youth development and social change.

The typical small group sizes of residential camp programs allow for camper's individual needs to be met while still promoting greater group interdependence. In the "mini-society" of camp, youth with disabilities are able to participate in a community complete with rules, roles, activities, and daily routines. Because the camp community is simpler than the

societal community, individuals, even those smitten by society, can experience a communal sense of belonging, take on active and valued roles, and see more clearly the personal and communal consequences and rewards of one's actions.

Camps provide a variety of challenges in daily living, social interaction, communication, and the learning of new recreational skills. The camp setting allows for youth with and without disabilities to successfully meet challenges, both independently and as a group, contributing to increased self-confidence, self-direction, and independence. Camps also offer a large variety of experiential learning opportunities, which help youth understand the immediate and concrete consequences of their actions. "Hands-on learning is among the effective teaching techniques for children with disabilities; thus, the teaching approach used in camp programs is a good fit for campers with disabilities."<sup>38</sup>

Research within the field of social work offers clear evidence that outdoor programs, including residential camps, are effective agents in promoting individual and group change. Therapeutic programs are more effective when held in the wilderness versus the clinical setting in promoting change.<sup>39</sup> Rather than fifteen to twenty different staff/client interactions in a given week, which "diffuses the adolescent's transference amongst numerous individuals,"<sup>40</sup> the outdoor setting allows for several staff members to be "potentially exposed to client issues and needs on a 24-hour a day basis"<sup>41</sup> for the duration of the program. The wilderness setting also allows for a quicker breakdown of defense mechanisms and "has generally led to more rapid change in participants than one would expect to see in a more traditional therapeutic setting."<sup>42</sup> The effect of being outside is therapeutic in itself, and for participants who are institutionalized, the feeling of freedom that outdoor programs provide reduces an individual's resistance to change.<sup>43</sup>

James T. Neill's thorough meta-analysis on the outcomes of organized outdoor programs also demonstrates that outdoor programs are effective tools for inducing change. Neil states that outdoor programs are "capable of triggering an ongoing cycle of positive change within participants."<sup>44</sup> An individual's growth at camp is transferred and continues to develop in various ways in the individual as they participate in home, school, or community functions.

The National Inclusive Camp Practices (NICP) Study, completed 1997-2000, was the first in-depth, nation wide research project to focus on inclusive outdoor programs, and was also the first study to "determine that such programs have a positive effect on the growth and development of participants with and without disabilities."<sup>45</sup> Over the course of the study, the NICP evaluated a total of 743 youth (373 with and 370 without disabilities) from 12 residential camps and two resident outdoor school programs across the country. The study utilized validated measures to collect qualitative and quantitative data, as well as using surveys, behavioral assessments, individual case studies, and video samples. The following paragraphs, based on the findings of the NICP, provide strong evidence of the positive benefits of inclusive camp programs on campers, staff, and communities.<sup>46</sup>

A majority of counselors and parents included in the NICP Study of inclusive outdoor programs reported positive growth in youth in one or more of the following areas: "social interactions, communication with others, responsibilities, self-reliance, self-esteem, participation in recreation, skill achievement, self-help, and respect for others." These new skills are reportedly "evident to parents in (their child's) subsequent social interactions and self-reflections."<sup>47</sup> Approximately 87% of counselors and 80% of parents noted positive

growth in these areas in youth with disabilities while 84% of counselors and 65% of parents noted similar growth in youth without disabilities.<sup>48</sup>

Additional NICP results indicate that inclusive camp programs are beneficial for all participants and staff. Parents, camp staff, and professionals reported positive growth in individuals as a result of participating in an inclusive camp. Following a child's return from camp, parents reported that their child was less timid, more aware of social cues, and more willing to initiate social interaction with new people. A caseworker of a youth with disabilities described this youth's growth by saying: "I can't believe so much change could happen in one week. She really made good friends for the first time and is now more confident about talking to new people."<sup>49</sup> Parents and counselors described increased self-esteem that resulted in improved self-confidence and a desire to do more challenging activities and try new things. Parents and counselors also reported increases in self-reliance, evident in youths being more responsible for themselves and their belongings, as well as an increased determination to do things by themselves and to persist with an activity until finished. Progress was also made in greater initiative to complete chores and determine one's free-time activities.<sup>50</sup>

Statistics demonstrate overall lower rates of employment for people with disabilities,<sup>51</sup> which often results in people with disabilities having considerably more, even "forced," leisure time.<sup>52</sup> A knowledge and self-initiative in leisure activities is a positive benefit of camp for people with disabilities. Another positive benefit of inclusive outdoor programs, as cited in the NICP, was growth in communication skills, which resulted in increased skills in listening, initiating talks, expressing personal needs and feelings, resolving miscommunications, and leading others in problem solving. Counselors and parents also reported growth in respect for

others, both in youth with and without disabilities, which resulted in heightened sensitivity and awareness to the challenges of others and a greater understanding of differences.<sup>53</sup>

The NICP also recorded many positive outcomes of inclusive outdoor programs on counselors. As a result of working as staff members at an inclusive camp, staffs were reportedly more positive in their views of inclusion and equal access. Both their perspective on camp programs and their perspective on society shifted towards the advocacy of inclusion. Program directors and staff “reported that the overall caring, tolerance, creativity, quality of leadership, and sense of community were enhanced when their camp or outdoor school became inclusive.”<sup>54</sup>

Additional studies demonstrate a similar increase in personal initiative or self-directed independence in youths with disabilities following their participation in an inclusive outdoor program. Similar patterns of growth were found in the following areas: self-help and tasks of daily living, increased self-reliance and decision making, leisure activities, social interactions, improved ability to communicate one’s needs, and interest in helping others.”<sup>55</sup>

The opportunities created by inclusive outdoor programs, which foster the interaction of people with and without disabilities, result in a wide variety of benefits for participants, staff, and society. For people with disabilities, inclusive programs provide opportunities for personal development, to learn social skills, and to form support networks necessary for mainstreamed life.<sup>56</sup> In addition to these benefits, inclusive camp programs foster more positive attitudes in able-bodied participants towards people with disabilities.

Participating in an inclusive program “challenges all assumptions about disability. People realize that the disabled are far more able than they had assumed. In that environment, it’s amazing how quickly you lose sight of physical differences.”<sup>57</sup> An inclusive outdoor

program is beneficial in dispelling disabling stigmas and stereotypes that society places on people with disabilities. Many people with disabilities “are more scared of the tile, “The Disabled” than they are of the disabling condition,” and it is the “reaction and non-action of society which causes the most problems for persons with disabilities.”<sup>58</sup>

An inclusive approach to outdoor ministry, which includes people of all abilities, is necessary. Given the results of research, which demonstrate the wide variety of benefits of inclusive classrooms and outdoor programs, and the theology of Christian communities, which supports inclusive programming, Christian outdoor ministries should be at the forefront of the inclusion movement. Christian theology supports the inclusion of people with disabilities and offers a foundation for leadership in the inclusion movement. Theologically, Christians believe in the inherent self-worth of the individual as a unique creation of God. The Christian community also relies on the unique gifts of all people; each individual, regardless of ability, is indispensable to the body of Christ. The foundation for inclusive ministry is found in Jesus Christ’s ministry to the sick and disabled, and by emulating his ministry, Christian communities can bring healing to people with disabilities. By becoming more inclusive, Christian camps and outdoor ministries will grow stronger as Christian communities while serving and being served by a more diverse population.

Christians believe in the inherent self-worth of the individual, for “in the image of God” all were created (Genesis 1:27, NRSV). The theological basis for accepting people who have disabilities “begins with the premise that *all* human beings have been created in God’s image,”<sup>59</sup> metaphorically rather than literally.<sup>60</sup> God is intimately involved in the creation of each human being, shaping the unique abilities and potential gifts of each person. Psalm 139

describes God's active role in creating the individual, forming his inward parts and "knitting" him together while in his mother's womb. Too often God is considered to be a member of the "able-bodied world,"<sup>61</sup> which in effect perpetuates the societal image of the "perfect" body, while further excluding people, such as those with disabilities, who do not fit this image. God "does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7, NRSV).

Christian communities believe not only in the inherent value of the individual with disabilities and in the gifts they may offer to the congregation and to society, but they also believe that individuals with disabilities are indispensable members of the body of Christ. Theologically, differences in a person's ability are regarded positively. As Jürgen Moltmann states, "every disability is also a gift."<sup>62</sup> By nature, human beings are individually unique in their abilities and their limitations, and "the characteristics of each person in the faith community are essential for the life of a gathering."<sup>63</sup> God works through *all* people in a variety of ways. The apostle Paul recognizes that "there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit," and that these gifts are to be offered for the "common good" of the Christian community (1 Corinthians 12:4-5, NRSV). According to the apostle Paul, "each person (brings) an invaluable contribution to the body of Christ."<sup>64</sup>

Christian communities are characterized by respect, love, and forgiveness, and by embodying these characteristics, the Christian community "is the incarnated Body of Christ," acting as a "credible sign of the Kingdom (of God) in the world."<sup>65</sup> Welcoming the stranger, orphan, or widow was a part of the Hebrew tradition and broadly practiced by Jesus in his outreach to those on the fringe of society. God's long tradition of advocating on behalf of people in need was clearly personified in the ministry of Jesus the Christ, who spent much of

his time ministering to “otherly-abled” members of society. Jesus brought healing to people with a wide variety of disabilities, including the blind, deaf, and lame. Christian communities are called to base their ministry on the “personhood of God in the form of Jesus of Nazareth;”<sup>66</sup> the ministry of Jesus Christ lays the foundation for inclusive Christian communities.

The ministry of Jesus towards people with disabilities should serve as a paradigm for “how the church can treat, work, and live with persons with disabilities.”<sup>67</sup> Jesus brought not only physical healing but cognitive and spiritual healing as well. “Jesus identified with those who were sick or disabled; for the sufferer’s sake, he also suffered.”<sup>68</sup> Healing began in individuals with disabilities when they realized they no longer had to carry their “yoke of oppression”<sup>69</sup> alone. The love and acceptance of Jesus the Christ brought a healing of liberation and freedom to people with disabilities. Through learning “to experience the God who accepts and loves them for who they are, they experienced a healing which goes beyond a therapist’s grasp, for it is an acceptance that envelopes the whole person, with one’s limitations and gifts.”<sup>70</sup>

It is important to recognize that the Christian community as the body of Christ represents the resurrected, yet bodily impaired Jesus Christ, who yet embodies the reality of impaired hands, feet, and side. The image of Jesus as the “disabled God” is consonant with Jesus the stigmatized Jew and person of color, and representative of the poor, hungry, and outcast of society.<sup>71</sup> “It is when the church is most like Christ, identifying and conforming with the same concerns that Jesus had, having empathy with those people who are poor and oppressed that it is most like the Body of Christ.”<sup>72</sup> However, “when the church fails to invite and welcome people with disabilities, (the church has) betrayed the very people with whom Christ closely identified during his life ministry.”<sup>73</sup>

Jesus Christ, the foundation of the Christian community, associated himself with people with disabilities, advocating for their inclusion in society by his example. The church's relationship with Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God "leads toward the inclusion of people with...disabilities."<sup>74</sup> Christian communities need to offer the healing touch of Jesus Christ while synchronically accepting the healing brought to their community by people with disabilities. Through embracing "synergistic ideals,"<sup>75</sup> Christian communities will be transformed by the healing power of Jesus Christ. An individual's faith should be a "community enterprise" rather than "an isolated or isolating journey,"<sup>76</sup> therefore, the faith of the individual with disabilities requires communal nurture and development. Theological support requires that people with disabilities are welcomed as equal and full participants in the Christian community.

Just as people with disabilities need to receive the healing that results from being part of a faith community, likewise, faith communities need to be healed by the presence of people with disabilities in their gathering. The presence of people with disabilities in the Christian community challenges and excites the collective imagination, pressing towards more caring and compassionate communities, as well as challenging presuppositions about community and the nature of God.<sup>77</sup> People with disabilities offer an alternative worldview that can liberate able-bodied people from insecurities, teaching one to accept one's own limitations and abilities as God given, and to realize that one is accepted by God regardless of ability.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann makes a strong argument against excluding people with disabilities from the faith community in his statement: "Churches without persons with disabilities are disabled churches."<sup>78</sup> Excluding people with disabilities from a faith community may in effect result in a self-centered, self-contained, "henotheistic" society that

loses touch not only with oppressed members of society, but also with other churches. “This church is no longer a sign of the Commonwealth of Being nor of the intimate and real presence of Jesus Christ.”<sup>79</sup> The Christian community, after all, “thrives on diversity, on weakness, and on including the stranger.”<sup>80</sup> According to the apostle Paul, “God arranged the members” of the Christian community, or the “body of Christ” purposefully, giving greater honor to those that society may consider to be “the inferior member” (1 Corinthians 12:18, 24, NRSV).

It is within Christian churches and Christian camps that all people, including those with disabilities, can find the healing “freedom to explore and discover one’s potential”<sup>81</sup> and self-worth. If we believe that camps are “powerful examples” of what a Christian community can be, “then outdoor programs become one of the most important places to practice inclusion, and demonstrate to youth the worth and potential of living in an inclusive society.”<sup>82</sup> Through modeling theologically based inclusive practices, Christian camps and outdoor ministries can take on a leadership role that supports the continuation of social and organizational change towards inclusion.

Christian communities may benefit from imitating the societal movement for inclusion of people with disabilities. Brett Webb-Mitchell addresses the correlation between Christian community and societal treatment of people with disabilities in his thesis. Webb-Mitchell states that “the church congregation treats people with disabling conditions in a microcosmic representation of what is happening on a macrocosmic scale through the entire fabric of the social ethos in American society” (1984).<sup>83</sup> However, if Christian outdoor ministries emulated the inclusive trends of society evident in civil rights legislation and in the public schools, it is possible that these Christian communities could more effectively represent the “Commonwealth of Being,” or Kingdom of God. The reciprocative of Webb-Mitchell’s

hypothesis is necessary; Christian communities may benefit by imitating the societal movement for inclusion of people with disabilities.

An open dialogue, or even partnership between Christian communities and organizations or agencies serving people with disabilities, will further benefit both parties in progressing towards more inclusive communities. Whether these agencies provide additional staff training about the needs of people with disabilities, refer and prepare campers or staff with disabilities for a specific camp, or even co-create and co-staff an inclusive program, *everyone* will benefit.<sup>84</sup>

Not only can Christian camps benefit from an open dialogue with secular organizations and agencies, but these secular groups, and society at large will in turn benefit from this partnership. Inclusive outdoor ministries need to play a critical role in society as “models for the expression of human rights, the respect of individual differences, and the development of attitudes and values that honor diversity.”<sup>85</sup> Christian camps can offer society their leadership, in both inclusive philosophy and practice, which recognizes the self-worth of the individual, the indispensable role of the individual in the community, and role of the community in healing individuals with disabilities. As Christian camps and outdoor ministries become “successful mechanisms of support”<sup>86</sup> for the equal inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of society, their influence on societal views of inclusion will greatly increase.

A paradigm shift, which transforms the larger social system of American society into a macrocosmic representation of Christian community, manifested in the Christian community of outdoor ministry, is essential. When the dynamic healing of Jesus Christ empowers the societal movement of inclusion, within civil rights legislation, organizations, public schools, camps, and society at large, a powerful and healing transfiguration will proceed.

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- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Steve Brannan, et. al., *Including Youth with Disabilities in Outdoor Programs: Best Practices, Outcomes, and Resources* (Champaign: Sagamore Publishing, 2003), 42.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 44.
- <sup>5</sup> Ann Fullerton, et. al., *The Impact of Camp Programs on Children with Disabilities: Opportunities for Independence*. Paper published in Coalition for Education in the Outdoors 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial Research Symposium (Bradford Woods, IN, January 14-16, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup> Brannan, *Including Youth*, 44.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 44.
- <sup>8</sup> 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>>
- <sup>9</sup> Brannan, *Including Youth*, 238.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 36.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 41.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 41.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 45.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 19.
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