

## **Association of United Church Educators newsletter**

### **Camp and Your Church: Partners in Ministry**

By Rev. Bryan S. Breault

A strong outdoor ministries program is an extension of the local church's religious education, not a product to be consumed. Outdoor ministry professionals generally cannot comprehend their work apart from their partner relationship with pastors and religious education directors. Speaking for myself, I can't imagine running a camp without the central purpose being to create interior and exterior space for the Holy Spirit to move. The camp week often underscores and supports what has been learned at church through the year and energizes people's faith as they return to home, school and church.

As I move through my year, preparing for those fast flying three months of summer, and as I direct the program itself, I am aware of two aspects of Jesus' ministry that are so central to my work as a United Church of Christ Director of Outdoor Ministries: prayer and community. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus often leaves the bustling crowds in order to enter into prayer. We read about Jesus going to the mountain, the wilderness, the lakeshore, to a lonely place, in order to be free of all distractions and focus on God. When Jesus is finished, he always returns into the heart of community, where he spends the bulk of his time.

This drawing away and coming together is central to Christian camping. We withdraw from our day to day and enter a community of believers and seekers. As the world grows more connected by various electronic wonders, we ironically seem to be growing less connected to one another. Most church camps encourage or require that such devices be left at home. I've seen young people go through true withdrawal as they face the unfamiliar and uncomfortable sensation of being unplugged. It takes about a day and half before those sensations give way to that which they so effectively suppress. What ensues is a joyful blossoming of self. As children, young people and adults connect with themselves they find connecting with others who are doing the same to be natural and organic. The comment I hear most often from campers and counselors is "at camp, I can be myself."

Into this phenomenon, inject several elements: intentional community building, fellowship, soulful worship, time for reflection and purposeful Christian programming. It's a trusted recipe and the yield is room for the Holy Spirit: room within the community as well as inside the individual human heart.

Remember, camp is not just for children. Most have family and adult programs as well. When I speak at churches urging them to support and utilize our camping program I ask how many people would own a beautiful, peaceful, and sacred place on a quiet lake, and never go there! As members of the church, they are in fact partners in this endeavor. Religious educators are the key elements in the flow of energy and faith building that

happens at camp and returns to the church. There are so many ways to support camping ministry:

- Enthusiastically support the promotional efforts of the camp by displaying posters provided by the camp, and camp brochures in key places.
- Create a camp bulletin board displaying photos from your church members' time at camp.
- Hold a "Camp Sunday." Often members of your camp's operating committee will help out and visit. Invite children and adults who have attended to speak. Sing camp songs, create an altar on the chancel made from canoe paddles and an (unlit) campfire. Afterwards, hold an informational session for parents and those interested. Be sure to hand out camp brochures.
- Ask the camp to send someone to a youth group meeting, and ask them to bring photos to project. If your camp has a promotional video, show it.
- Link your camp's website from your church's website.
- Write articles for your churches newsletter. Ask campers to do the same.
- Publicize any and all scholarship funds available. Include special groups such as women's fellowship, and your judicatory as well.
- If your program utilizes volunteers, try to encourage adults to participate as counselors.
- Bring your youth group to a work day or hold a retreat at the camp.
- Find out which songs are most loved at camp and use them in your Sunday school and youth programs
- Get a list of who is signed up for camp from your church and send them mail during their week of camp. Check in with them when they return.
- Call your camp director and ask what you can do to get your church more involved.
- Ask your pastor to remember camp during the prayer time.

Create a culture that includes camp as a vital part of your program. You will not only be supporting your camping program, you will be offering a great gift to your church members and you will feel an incredibly positive affect on your church community.

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