

Christian Camping: Present Reality and Future Possibilities

By:

Amanda Jane Henderson

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Introduction

I fell into camping ministry four years ago. As a child I was too shy to go to camp alone, and when I entered my teens summer jobs began to fill my time. Entering camping ministry at the age many are winding down their camping involvement has been an interesting experience. The four years have had a sharp learning curve. Perhaps one of the most important lessons, however, has been the realization that camping ministry is a vitally important ministry, and this realization has led to the following paper. In researching my thesis on youth and evangelism it is clear that as society continues to change so must evangelism strategies for youth. Camping ministry has a unique opportunity to connect to children and youth who may otherwise never be reached by the church. That being said, we live in an increasingly secular society, or as some prefer (in an extremely ambiguous sense) a “spiritual” society. What draws children and youth to Christian camps in an age of technology and declining numbers in many churches?

Every summer thousands of children and teens pass through the doors of Christian camps, eagerly anticipating the coming experience. There will be new skills to learn, songs to sing, new friends to be made, and games that will not require a screen and console. They will come from all socio-economic brackets, and represent different cultures and backgrounds. Some will stand nervously on the sidelines as it is their first camp experience, while others will charge confidently ahead because it is their sixth summer. Some have been raised in the church, while others will hear the nativity story for the first time. Among all the similarities and differences, there is a unifying theme in Christian camps — we all honor and serve the same God. All of the factors that some in the world may consider important are wiped away, and for a week (or however long their stay) these children and youth are welcomed into a community where they are loved and accepted — that fact alone has some children try to attend more than

one camp per summer.

This paper is limited in a sense, as it will not be examining camping ministry from the views of children and youth. Instead, the focus will be on the perceived value of Christian camping, the problems that the movement is currently facing, and possible ways forward. It is also important to keep in mind that this is a preliminary paper, examining basic issues and is meant to be a starting place — not a definitive conclusion. When I began this paper I had assumed there would be a body of information on Christian camping, and while limited, it would be a beginning place. However, I found fewer sources that have been written since the 1960s (and were relevant) than I expected, outside of the 2005 Christian Camping International Canada survey and a few other resources. Therefore, it was decided that perhaps it would be best to begin an interview process, speaking to some of the more experienced people in the movement, and hearing first hand their thoughts, experiences, and concerns. This paper will take the form of a case study, and my intention is to help identify the current state of Christian camping, and begin a dialogue of possible ways forward.

In order to discern the state of Christian camping in Canada, the researcher contacted ten people identified as leaders in the Christian camping movement in Canada by the leadership of Christian Camping International – Canada. From that initial contact several other names were mentioned. Among those contacted were the Executive Directors of the following camps: Ontario Pioneer Camp, Circle Square Ranch, Muskoka Woods Sports Resort, Qwanoes, Parkside Ranch, Camp Peniel, and Camp Geddie (affiliated with two additional camps). These camps are located in the following provinces: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. They represent a cross section of denominations and para-church organizations. A number of

other leading youth workers, and consultants were also interviewed.

Strengths and Value of Christian Camping

In a world that is constantly developing and changing, evaluating methods and programs to make sure that they are still running efficiently is commonplace. From technology to church programs, inefficient or out-of-date methods are discarded in favour of new ones. While camping ministry has become an engrained part of church culture, does it still hold its value? Should time and money still be invested into Christian camps, or is it time to look for a better form of outreach? This question can perhaps best be answered by looking at the strengths of the Christian camping movement. Out of the ten interviews conducted, eight responded that one of the greatest strengths of camping ministry is the opportunity to connect with children and youth that would otherwise remain outside the reach of the church. As one respondent said, "Camping ministry offers children and youth the opportunity to form authentic relationships — through living in community, living as a family, sharing meals and playing, young people are invited to be themselves and be affirmed in that." Camping ministry also offers intentional one-on-one time that allows staff the opportunity to walk alongside campers in their faith journey. Within the intense nature of camp there is an opportunity to build relationships over a period of days that you do not get in other youth ministry programs that rely on shorter bursts of contact. As one respondent pointed out, "Being at camp removes children out of the normal rhythm of their lives, and places them in a highly intentional environment." This process is what Kenda Creasy-Dean describes as "dehabituating" or, adopting ascetic practices. As she explains,

These practices break us out of habitual rhythms and introduce God's cadence instead. Ascetic practices, designed to awaken the soul from its inertia, to break destructive emotional and physical habits, and to renew energy and insight by removing us from the context and habits of daily living, serve as means to renewed and intensified religious experience. Modern-day youth make

pilgrimages to summer camp, mission trips, retreats.¹

Camp environment is also an important evangelism tool because it allows friends to invite friends to come with them, thus allowing non-Christian children a chance to hear the gospel. In a world where environmental issues are also at the forefront, camping ministry can offer a unique wilderness context, and an authentic, strong link to creation with a biblical basis.

While camping ministry has a lot to offer children and youth, it is not only the campers who leave with positive experiences. Camping ministry is also a place where, as one respondent described, "Kingdom leaders are launched." Camp is a safe environment where leadership opportunities are offered to older and younger people alike, and it is a place for them to gain ministry experience in a structured environment. As one respondent said, it is a way for people in church to serve, experience leadership development, and gain ministry experience — which is also beneficial for the church. It is also a place where people learn how to model their faith and be an example of Christ. As one respondent pointed out, "For campers, these role-models are positive examples of people who take faith seriously, but at the same time are seriously cool people."

It is evident that camping ministry has a lot to offer campers, staff, and the church as a whole, but this has come about and been made possible by the hard work and dedication of many people. One of the strengths identified within the Christian camping movement is the national dedication of Christian leaders. Within the movement are people of incredible passion, spiritual responsiveness, and maturity. Often working long hours, and struggling with an increasingly complex industry, camp leaders are not only passionate — but are recognizing that changes need to be made to become more relevant. This recognition of the need for change is another

¹ Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 117.

strength in the movement. As one respondent pointed out, camp directors and boards are more open to innovation and partnerships than many churches and denominations. People are eager to learn and are open to innovative ideas and strategies. This desire for relevance is not only necessary in a changing society, but also demonstrates a movement that wants to continue to grow. This openness to ideas is also creating what one person described as, "A strengthening network across the country." This has caused collaboration across denominational lines — something that some view as a positive development in an increasingly secular society. Organizations like Christian Camping International also help with the diffusion of ideas, encouragement, and innovative ideas.

In a society that is becoming increasingly secular, Christian camping offers an effective environment for evangelism, and has the opportunity to reach young people that may otherwise be missed by the church. Camp is an intentional environment that allows staff to walk along beside campers in their spiritual journey. This is made possible through the intense nature of camp where people are removed from the normal rhythm of their lives, and introduced to the cadence of God, and the vitality of Christian community. Camp not only benefits children and communities, but also staff, where they are given leadership opportunities in a safe, and structured environment. Here people learn how to serve others, and model a Christ-like life. Camp is a place where kingdom leaders can be launched. With an increasing national network, and an openness to new ideas camps are growing and changing. While there is a lot of value in Christian camping, and a number of strengths, how are the overall numbers within the Christian camping movement?

Gaining An Overall Sense of National Numbers

This question was included in the interviews to help gain an overall sense of the Christian

camping movement and attendance numbers. Therefore, it is based on the experience of people working within, or familiar with the movement, and the general trends they have been observing. Three of the nine respondents for this question (altogether there were ten interviews but one did not address this question) believe that the movement is in decline, not a steep decline but on a downward spiral nonetheless. All three of these respondents mentioned that while some camps may close over the next few years, other camps will not only survive, but also thrive. As one person said, "This is due to the effort, tenacity, and prayer with which they attend their ministry." Another said that some may grow and some may die based on economic leadership, and a willingness to adapt their programs to reach youth. He mentioned that camps are experiencing many of the same problems as churches, and some grow and adapt while others do not.

Three of the respondents felt that the movement is currently holding steady. Of these, one mentioned that smaller camps are starting to die because they are unable to keep up and adapt. Committees also complicate the process, when, for example, a Director has to fight with them just to have warm shower water installed. She said that, "If you can't get past the mind set of some people to bring your camp forward you will die." Another said a contributing factor in the current holding pattern is that many of the existing camps were built around the turn of the century or the 1950s, and due to the high costs of expansion are running at capacity, and therefore not growing. The third respondent in this category said that there is currently an over capacity in the movement, and while camping capacity has grown 24% there has only been a 12% increase in attendance.

Two of the respondents said that camps are both dying, and flourishing, depending on the camp. This response picks up similar themes from the other interviews, as one person stated, "Camps who are irrelevant and stuck in the 1950s are dying while camps that are renovating and

innovating are growing." The other person in this category said that camping is in a tender stage. While some camps they are familiar with are struggling, and hurting, there is an enthusiasm for camping growing in support of the wider community. In her words, "Bottom line, I think we are in the make or break era."

Only one person said that they believe it is on the rise. They have witnessed positive growth at their camp for over twenty summers, and currently have a waiting list. They mentioned an important factor when looking at numbers in the camping movement — we should be careful to distinguish between children at camp, adults at camp, guest groups etc. For example, while some camps may be experiencing a decline in guest groups, the number of children they have attending could be holding steady.

Overall there is a similar theme carried throughout almost all of the answers —whether numbers are up, down, or holding steady, it is the mindset, adaptability, innovation, and responsible leadership that help determine the state of the camp. Those unwilling to change or use new strategies will not survive. Perhaps the best word to describe the current movement is tender, as camps try to discern their way forward through increasingly complex issues and shifting demographics.

While some reasons have been mentioned that contribute to the overall numbers of young people attending camp, there are additional factors that should be considered as well. Some of these reasons overlap with the challenges that the movement is currently facing, but they should still be mentioned here. Three of the respondents pointed out that Christian camping is currently facing a lot of competition from other areas. For example, as one interviewee said, there is, "More competition for campers commitment and dollars: there are so many other good alternatives out there, for example, excellent secular skills camps, other Christian camps, and

money-making opportunities." Another person also mentioned travel, and short-term mission trips. Some families are also deciding to do family holidays, rather than separating the family for a camp experience, this could mean a trip to Disney world, down South, or a cruise, for example.

Three respondents also mentioned the changing market place, where there are a lot fewer children in the age demographic. While camping has been an ingrained part of WASP culture, we can no longer take for granted the fact that camping is part of the broad, and increasingly multi-ethnic Canadian culture. For an increasing number of Canadian families, camping is no longer part of their traditional experience, and is not in their psyche. Camp will have to adjust to the shifting market, and offer programs that work with the changes taking place in society. Another big issue for camps is finding and paying for an excellent and gifted staff; currently a number of camps are running understaffed and unable to keep up with the demands. Programming is another concern, as one person said, "People are looking for cheap child care and not so concerned with program or Christian program especially...camps can easily lose their identity and try to be all things to all people, working to be program rich and losing their uniqueness in the camping world in the process." At the same time another person pointed out that unless you have some sort of "wow" factor to interest people you may not attract campers. There is a tension required in this area that can be difficult to locate and maintain. One other aspect that should be mentioned is lack of facilities and an inability to keep up with regulations. As mentioned earlier, a number of these factors overlap with the challenges being faced within the Christian camping movement, and will be examined later in this paper. It is important to mention them here however, to help illustrate how complicated the issue of enrollment is, and the other issues that need to be dealt with and overcome in relevant ways.

Challenges In the Christian Camping Movement

There were three major challenges mentioned almost unanimously within the interviews, they are staffing, finances, and risk management/regulations. Staffing has become increasingly difficult and with the rising costs of university tuition, many young leaders can no longer afford to be on staff. If they decide to work at camp, often it can only be for one summer out of four, which means that there are few returning staff year after year. This experienced leadership shortage also means that some camps are forced to run understaffed, or without any older and experienced staff. Another challenge that was mentioned in regards to staffing is the general lack of biblical knowledge, and inability to answer basic questions, adding an additional element to staff training. One respondent also mentioned few people are entering into camp ministry as a career, and with increasingly complex issues like regulations and marketing, the industry needs people entering it with proper training.

The second biggest challenge is financial matters. This is affected by many different factors, and is a hurdle many camps are struggling to overcome. With the general decline of some churches and denominations in Canada, there is less funding for camps to draw from. Spaces that are running at maximum capacity are having difficulties raising the money to expand and grow. Operational costs are also continually rising, and some camps have experienced the doubling of their insurance from one year to the next. The Canada Revenue Agency is also challenging some camps on their charitable status. Unsustainable debt loads, less denominational funding, and budgets that often do not allow for facility depreciation, further challenge camps. Very few Christian camps actually make a profit from year to year (intentionally), and while this helps families afford to send their children, it leaves little room for facility maintenance, and rising operational costs.

The third major challenge is risk management/regulations, which affects insurance, finances, and the day-to-day operations of camp. As one respondent said, "Government regulations, environmental regulations, safety, paperwork — the sheer cost of staying legal is enormous." For example, the need to change a waterfront could cost fifty thousand dollars in order to make sure that it fulfills requirements. Risk management is also of the utmost importance, and camps need to be proactive about staying on top of regulations and protocol. In some cases this may require professional help. One respondent pointed out that if you have forty-two regulations to sift through, you may need an expert to help guide you through it. With increasing measures and regulations there is a lot that needs to be understood, and constantly kept in mind by camps.

Outside of the three major challenges there were a few others that should be noted. The shifting demographics within our society is one challenge that the camping movement needs to keep in mind. This may mean offering a day camp option for people who have not grown up with camping as part of their culture, or rethinking how they do camp. Being relevant in ministry is another challenge, and as one person said, "Finding appropriate ways to reach un-churched kids, and appropriate and innovative ways of doing evangelism." Another problem is the decline of the church, and lack of denominational funding. If a camp is depending largely on funding from within their church, what will they do if the amounts available decrease each year? Will the camp still be able to support itself? Not to mention there is also a decline in volunteers as peoples lives are busier, and they have more competing options for their time. The last challenge mentioned by a number of the interviewees, is that of a growing disparity between camps. Big camps are continuing to grow, while weaker camps become weaker. The camps that are being run well, regardless of size, should continue on strongly, while weaker

camps unable or unwilling to deal with the major issues will die — there will be no room for mediocrity within the camping movement. While that sounds harsh, the reality is with more activities competing for the interests of children and teens, there is no room for camps to be unclear of their vision, or what they are offering.

Within this brief survey of challenges facing camps, it is obvious that the issues are complex, and require a lot of innovation and attention if they are to be overcome. The good news is that if leaders, churches, and committees are willing to work at it, their time will be rewarded. As one person noted, although camp experience may not be as prevalent in the mindset of society as it once was, it is still a part of culture, and people need to be reminded of the value of attending camp.

"There is physical activity, outdoor activity, opportunity for simple things, being together in community, actual adventure not just on a screen. People want their children to do that, and see the value of these things (even non-Christians) because it helps children increase confidence, develop relationships, see and experience new things. The inherent value of camping ministry is still there, we need people to continue to be aware of it. Think of the zip line at the Olympics, it was an adventure people stood in line for six hours just to try — but in many camps zip lines are part of the camp experience. There is an aspect of discovery at camp. Plus this is really God's adventure, and he will support something that enables kids to find Him, and come to know Him. Camp maximizes on how people come to learn and know God — through creation, relationship, and the word, so camping is important to God's heart."

Realistically there are many challenges facing Christian camps, but there is also a lot of value in Christian camping, and tremendous benefits. In order to grow, and to overcome camps need to be willing to take the necessary steps forward.

Innovative Ideas and Possible Ways Forward

While there were a couple common ideas, overall there are many different suggestions, and it is here that I hope the dialogue will begin. With fresh thoughts, and a sharing of experiences it is my hope that the Christian camping movement can continue to find a way forward, continue to flourish, and continue to make a difference in the lives of countless young

people.

The most common theme running through the interviews in terms of ideas was day camps. This concept is important for several reasons. Firstly, it is a way to introduce the camp experience to children whose parents would not otherwise let them go. One respondent mentioned “helicopter parents” who hover over their children, and this form of camp ministry helps alleviate some of the anxiety. It is also a way to attract cross-culturally, as it is a way to become acquainted with camping ministry in a less intimidating manner. One respondent said that about 80% of the people coming to them were asking about day camps, so they now offer it as an augment to their overnight camps. If the camp had been unwilling to change and offer it as an option, they could have lost a lot of potential campers. Some churches are also moving away from the Vacation Bible School model in favor of day camps. Not to mention that day camps are a cheaper alternative for people and fits better with the psyche of some parents. Another unique opportunity with day camps is also the possibility of doing activities in urban centers, for example do a skate boarding camp. We will likely see the theme of day camps more over the next few years, the only question is how camps will begin to assimilate it into their model.

Another common suggestion was camping ministry being a form of outreach into the community. This is not only important for the camp, but also for the Church, as it can be a way of connecting the Church to the local community. One respondent suggested that this could be done by inviting school groups and university groups in to use the site, and experience the hospitality of Christian camps. This is a simple but effective outreach. Another example that someone offered would be to have a church group come in and use the camp facilities to offer a brunch for the local community. This form of outreach also helps connect the camp to the

community.

There are a number of camps currently looking into intergenerational camps as well. Not necessarily the traditional model of family camp, but one that is able to incorporate families and people of all ages. It could also be a way for families to have experiences together, and could take the place of a normal family vacation. It also has the potential to attract children whose parents would not let them come alone.

Some camps are also beginning, where possible, to maximize facility usage year round. Therefore they are asking questions like, “What would a winter program look like?” It also means that there is more potential for school groups and others to come in during the year, increasing exposure to the camp.

Another key idea that came up frequently was knowing your focus as a camp, and having a clearly defined vision. If a camp tries to be all things to all people it loses its focus, and identity. There is a market for niche marketing, or specialization, whether it is academics, outdoors activities, horseback riding, and countless other possibilities. This also affects the marketing of a camp, for it requires them to look at themselves, their facilities, and say, “What are we good at and what can we offer.” A camp does not have to offer fifty different programs to be good, but it does have to be aware of its vision, and work at strengthening their attributes. Lack of vision or identity was referred to as one of the biggest reasons that camps were dying and closing. If you do not know who you are as a camp, how do you market, grow and strengthen your program effectively? Where do you spend your money and your time? Camps cannot afford to not be clear on their identity and vision.

There was also a theme of building a leadership-training model, and offering opportunities for service — a place where words and actions are able to meet. A couple

examples of this would be to have a leadership-training program that allows people the chance to go, and learn and serve in another part of the world, or in urban areas and different communities. This approach helps develop kingdom leaders and not just camp leaders. It is also a way for young people to learn about service first hand, and to gain a greater understanding of the world they live in. This approach could also help draw in some youth looking for the short-term mission experience. Another way a respondent mentioned this could be done would be to offer a program at your camp where the main focus is service. For example, work a certain number of hours a day on a project, and then do programming in between. This could mean partnering with a local organization, or group like Habitat for Humanity, for example. Not only does this method benefit the young people in the program but also increases the networking of a camp and connects it to the community.

There were many other suggestions, a few of which I will mention here. One was to develop a way to track campers and help plug them into churches, and high school or university Christian groups. Another was to look into special needs camping and try to develop an integrated model. One camp in particular was experiencing success in this area. Another respondent suggested that because we need to consider how to attract cross-culturally, that camps should either collectively or of their own initiative begin to do multi-culture research to help develop models that would attract more people. It was also suggested that while camps try to keep their fees low to allow more people the ability to come, that a realistic review of expenses is also needed. Under charging will quickly catch up with a camp. Another unique idea that is beginning to take place is a youth pastor or worker being shared between a church and camp. For example for nine months of the year they work within the church and are paid by the church, and then for the rest of the year they work at camp and are paid by the camp. This provides for

a year round position, and is more affordable for some churches and camps because the financial aspects are shared between them. This approach also connects the camp to the church, and to the community.

A number of people in the interviews mentioned the need for increased links between camps and church. Camps need to share their vision, and communicate their goals clearly, while the church becomes the receiving agent for those who have accepted Christ at camp. It also allows campers the chance to identify with the larger body of the church. Christian camps and the Church are not mutually exclusive entities, rather, they are working together in common goals. A failure to recognize this is a loss on both sides.

There also appears to be a struggle between the ministry aspect of camp, and the business aspect of camp. A common theme throughout was that while camps are strong in the ministry area, they tend to be weaker on the business side. As one respondent said there needs to be an awareness of the tension between business and ministry. While camp is a ministry, an inability to balance the budget and keep up on regulations and other business-oriented aspects will quickly catch up with a camp. It is also important to be aware of marketing, and what people are looking for. Continually educating oneself is important as things change so rapidly. Being well informed also helps one make better decisions and quicker.

There was one other important theme that reoccurred throughout the interviews and as one respondent mentioned, "Camps need to partner to survive. Camps of a like mind need to come together, pool resources, training, help with financial and regulatory challenges, share potential and greater efficiency." An example of this would be for several camps to pool money and pay for someone to do risk assessment. Creative partnerships, and collaboration is already taking place across the country, with positive benefits. For example, one Maritime camp at the

recommendation of someone doubled their insurance coverage, but now pay ten thousand dollars less a year. It is advice and experience like this that helps camps overcome hurdles and challenges.

A Few Suggestions

When examining the interviews as a whole certain issues definitely came to the forefront, and the question now becomes, "How can we best solve these issues?" One of the problems was not having enough staff. At a recent Camping Association of Nova Scotia meeting it was suggested that perhaps having a place where resumes of applicants could be posted (with permission). Therefore if one camp had two life-guards apply the additional person could have their resume posted and camps could more easily fill their vacant positions. I know that Christian Camping International has camps posted that are looking for people to fill positions, but for many teenagers this is not necessarily the place they would think of checking for work at local camps. Therefore, perhaps regional databases directed to potential applicants would be beneficial.

There is also the question of attracting older returning staff, what would happen if camps were to partner with universities and colleges with the co-op programs? Therefore, a business major in a co-op program could work the summer at a camp gaining experience toward their educational goals. Some of these programs may also be subsidized. When completing my Master of Divinity I was allowed to complete some of my in-ministry hours at camp, all I had to do was make sure my evaluations were in. A canoe instructor also spent her summers at camp because she was in the process of becoming a physical education teacher. Partnerships like these may allow some university students the option of working at camp an additional summer.

As mentioned earlier, there is also the critique that some camps may be strong in

ministry, but weak in business. What if we designed an on-line course that camp leaders, ministers, students, etc. could take that dealt with budget, marketing, risk-management, community building, and innovative ideas among other things? I have heard a number of people say that while they have ministry experience they have not learned basic business skills, and when they go into a business meeting at church feel like they are in over their head. There are aspects of community development, business, etc. that would be beneficial for people working within the Christian camping movement. Then take the money from the course and re-invest it into the movement. One respondent commented that a scarcity mindset drives short term thinking, as the Christian camping movement in Canada what programs can we collectively design and invest in, that will help strengthen us in the long run? If God has given us this ministry, how can we honor it, and be good stewards of it?

Conclusion

Every year thousands of young people will file through the doors of Christian summer camps. They come for adventure, new experiences, new skills, community and friendship. They learn about God, and feel welcomed and accepted. There is a lot of value in Christian camping, and it is an important form of out reach and evangelism. There are a lot of challenges facing the Christian camping movement, including limited staffing, financial problems, and increased regulations. That being said there are also a lot of innovative ideas being employed to help overcome these issues. With a strengthening network across the country, Christian camps are rising to the challenge. While this paper is an exploratory work, and offers no definite solutions, my hope is that it can be a place for dialogue, as we adapt and change to the world around us. It is also important to remember that camps do not have to suffer alone, or worry that they are the only ones facing difficult situations. As the Christian camping movement in

Canada we are all in this together, how can we as a collective group strengthen our movement, and become more effective and relevant in our evangelism and outreach?