

# Camping and the Church

by Lloyd Mattson

It was June 1945, and my well-worn '31 Chevy limped eastward on U.S. 2 toward Spirit, Wisconsin. My goal was Spirit Baptist Church . . . where my education in the ways of churches was about to begin.

I found the church standing among the fields in quiet, white dignity. I felt comfortably in command, until that day in a tavern called the Green Lantern.

Spirit Township was dry, the adjoining township quite wet, and the Green Lantern pressed close to the township line. As junior camp at Wood Lake approached, I sought for camper prospects in the rural community.

I learned of a boy who had come to the area recently, the foster child of the proprietors of the Green Lantern. Possessed of far more zeal than knowledge, I

*I can still remember the rough oars in my hands, the gentle creaking of oarlocks, the warm smell of a northern lake in the summer. The lad's prayer was so simple, so earnest and untaught. He just asked Jesus to come into his heart.*

betook myself to the tavern on a bright July morning to talk about camp.

The folks inside were friendly and courteous. They were pleased that I offered to take their boy to camp. One thing led to another, and I stayed to chat for some time. Meanwhile, my now-familiar Chevy waited patiently in front of the

Green Lantern in full view of all who chanced by, and Tillie did.

Tillie was the church pianist, a lady of wide community interests. Her farm adjoined the church property.

The winds of the storm did not reach me prior to our Saturday departure for camp, but upon my return a week later, there were winds aplenty! I came home aglow to tell of a great week, but my words were swept away. The pastor, in the Green Lantern! In broad daylight, for all to see! The church was declared all but ruined.

Not many were listening when I told of the evening when I rowed close to shore on Wood Lake facing a small boy who lived in a tavern. I can still remember the rough oars in my hands, the gentle creaking of oarlocks, the warm smell of a northern lake in the summer. The

lad's prayer was so simple, so earnest and untaught. He just asked Jesus to come into his heart.

That first summer as a student pastor, I learned what I had suspected ever since I found Christ in a camp. Camp can be a pastor's best friend.

I also learned, if you plan to visit the Green Lantern, park out

back! Indeed, Jesus warned His disciples to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16 NIV).

†††

I believe the local church to be the heart of God's work. I'm grateful for every form of ministry that presents the Gospel to people. But the value of all those efforts rests on their relationship to the church. No work, including camp, will fulfill God's purpose in the lives of people without relating closely to local churches.

It's possible, though, that in our zeal for local churches we have taken some wrong turns. I can easily become jealous of any spiritual influence that I don't control, or any distraction that might lure my people.

I can become obsessed with the average attendance to the point where I become hostile toward anything that might draw one of my parishioners away when the church is in session. I may overlook the pronouns in that blessed promise our Lord made, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18 NIV).

When I hear myself talking about my church, I need to remember that. The church belongs to Jesus; I am His servant only. Yet, since a particular people make up the church I serve, I must accept responsibility and accountability. In that sense, it is my church, and I am the servant of the people.

If that is so, then I must utilize every help I can find to fulfill God's purpose for His church. It is folly to think I personally can fill every need. One of my strongest allies is the Bible camp.

†††

My central thesis is the unity of the church and the camp. The camp is the church at work outdoors. The locale is different, methodology may change, but the purpose and power are the same. The most serious obstacle seems to be geography. We are so prone to measuring success by numbers that we are terrified by the suggestion

pose the Lord didn't chase Pharaoh into the desert and let the children of Israel stay in town? God used the wilderness to train Moses, David, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, and John the Seer.

What does the wilderness offer that you can't find at home? A relief from ordinary distractions, extended time for spiritual reflection, a change of pace; come to think of it, these are the distinctives of Christian camping!

†††

Christian camps as we know them are peculiar to America, and to lands where American missionar-

Not everything a camp does is religious, to be sure, nor should it be. The camp has a better opportunity than the church to teach the unity of the spiritual life. God didn't save folks for Sunday, but for every moment of every day. In camp, the focus rests on life in the Spirit throughout all activity.

Looking again at the Great Commission, we see that Jesus requires His followers to recruit other followers (disciples). We understand that this results from presenting the Gospel to lost people, inviting them to receive Christ as Lord.

Then we are to bring new disciples into the church fellowship, the local church. Beyond that lies the adventure of Christian education, the process that lasts throughout life.

Once we understand that Christian education does not take place in a religious vacuum, we are comfortable with the methodology of camp, where mature Christian lives are brought to bear on young Christians in an atmosphere that breeds fun and trust. As this atmosphere grows through the camping period, the mind and heart absorb Christian truth by precept and example. We can understand what Christian educator Dr. Ted Ward meant when he said, "A camp is the greatest environment for learning today."

†††

But what responsibility does the church have for the camp? Some church leaders fear that the camp will drain dollars, and there is no denying the cost of building and maintaining camps. But when you divide the cost-per-camper, the expense is modest.

Camps hope to operate programs and pay personnel from program fees. Capital improvements must be funded from other sources. The churches that use the camp should bear a fair share of these costs, and not grudgingly.

Some churches and groups of churches own camps. Many churches are served by privately operated

*I must utilize every help I can find to fulfill God's purpose for His church.  
It is folly to think I personally can fill every need.  
One of my strongest allies is the Bible camp.*

that it's proper for people to miss church.

There isn't room to develop the theology of the church and the camp, only let me say that I work through the camp to serve my people, gaining benefits for them I can't offer at home.

Obviously, I am concerned with a camp's doctrinal stance. I would not knowingly send people where false teaching was present. But I would be overwhelmed with joy if the whole junior department was missing some Sunday because they were all attending camp. If the average attendance was a problem (which it isn't), I would simply count them!

My goals as a pastor are fixed on the spiritual growth of the people God has made me responsible for. I am convinced a camping experience can move them closer to God's purpose than whatever I might do in the service they miss.

Camping is healthy for the flock of God for many reasons, and it's a healthy flock that grows. We can trace God's use of the outdoors as an environment for spiritual discovery back to the patriarchs.

Acts 7:38 speaks of the church in the wilderness. Why do you sup-

ies have gone. Camping in other forms has existed for centuries here and there, but the Bible camp has its roots in our soil. We take our objectives as churches from the Scriptures: to evangelize, to integrate, to educate. The Great Commission provides the outline. Wherever we go, we are obligated to make disciples—followers of Jesus.

We are equally obligated to integrate the disciples into the visible body of Christ. Whatever meaning we attach to baptism, it has that effect. The baptized are recognized as members of the church, Christ's body. Then we are to educate, to teach all that Jesus commanded, and to lead the disciple into obedience to Christ.

I have examined the objectives of hundreds of camps and churches, and I find no conflict. Since the camp is seasonal, its people coming for brief periods, it cannot be a church, and shouldn't think of itself as a church.

The camp must turn to the churches for follow-up. But the camp and the church serve the same Lord with the same objectives. I see the camp as an extension of my work as a pastor.

camps. The latter are most apt to feel the coolness of churches toward support, churches that somehow feel it's not their responsibility. Christian camping is missions in the primary sense of the word and deserves missionary support.

Many camps look to the churches to supply board members. Churches should aggressively seek participation at this level, giving the church input at the highest administrative and advisory level.

A few camps have gone astray from the basic purpose of a Bible camp, and some have moved beyond reasonable limits in program, but churches that shun leadership responsibility must share the blame.

If you encounter a camp that refuses counsel or projects a fierce independence, hunt out another camp! No camp can survive without the churches.

Spiritual support goes without saying. The camp and its leaders should frequently find a place in the prayers of the church, publicly and privately. Camp leaders should be listed among the church's missionaries. They often become forgotten and lonely.

The church that views the camp as competition loses on all counts. I see the camp as my friend out there, working hard to serve my kids, youths, and adults. When I look over my congregation and hear their comments, I realize that more have been touched for Christ through camping than through any other activity we offer as a church. A friend like that deserves all the support I can muster.

**E**arly in my pastoral career I met "Bible Camp" Bill. Bill lived for one thing: to win the district camp attendance trophy, and he did, year after year. To many, Bill was a nuisance. He pushed camp all year long.

Some smiled at Bill's enthusiasm, thinking there must be more important matters in life than haul-

ing kids to camp, but I doubt that anyone in the church made greater impact on the spiritual lives of more people than Bible Camp Bill.

To build camp enthusiasm, look for a man or woman like Bill.

It never satisfied Bill just to tack camp posters on the church bulletin board. He worked on three groups: church leaders, parents, and prospective campers.



Without enthusiasm at the leadership level, nothing gets off the ground. Many a worthy cause has been tolerated to death. Camp must be high on the agenda of the top level of church administration, for getting young people to camp demands hard work and considerable money.

In most homes, parents hold the key to a child's participation in church programs. The fee is only part of the problem. Except for the poor, perceived value—not dollars—is the issue. Time and again churches have found that subsidizing camp didn't solve the attendance problem.

Parents with camping experience seldom need much promotion, for they know the values. But many prospective campers come from

*Camping is healthy for the flock of God for many reasons, and it's a healthy flock that grows. We can trace God's use of the outdoors as an environment for spiritual discovery back to the patriarchs.*

unchurched homes, where spiritual values aren't recognized. Yet such homes may respond to information on the recreational and educational benefits camp offers. Many simply need a visit or phone call urging support in camp promotion.

Though camp fees will continue to mount, along with all living costs, most parents will recognize the vacation bargain offered by Christian camps. You may wish to point this out, comparing Bible camp costs with fees charged by private or agency camps.

Campers present the least resistance to camp promotion, providing

a camp tradition is alive in the church. When this isn't so, difficult problems may exist, for kids seldom function individually. They move in clusters. If you can enroll the leaders, others will follow. Young people need the benefits of meeting Christians from other areas, and promotion among potential campers is a continuing challenge.

Bible Camp Bill had the most effective promotion down pat. He took his vacation and drove the kids to camp. He spent at least one week each summer as a counselor. He drove to camp with kids on other weekends as well.

Children respond to almost anything suggested by enthusiastic adults they admire. If the camp values we have discussed are real, then going out of our way and incurring whatever expense is needed to make camping possible for our church kids is a worthy missionary investment.

I urge pastors to become personally involved in camp, attending when possible, and encouraging camp enthusiasm constantly. Bible Camp Bill never had to sell me. I do everything possible to recruit and support camp boosters, which is in line with my perception of the pastor's role. It's hard, though, for

lay leaders to maintain enthusiasm when the pastor is indifferent.



Two problems face us regarding paying camp costs. Some families are relatively poor, and they simply can't afford camp, no matter how much they believe in it. Many families have enough money, but they are indifferent to camp values. We can easily write off such families, but if our purpose remains to meet spiritual needs, getting kids to camp reaches beyond the question of ability to pay.

Churches have adopted many

plans to help with camp fees. Before you turn off this subject, consider what you invest in a Bible conference or evangelistic meeting. Count all the costs: travel, honorarium, entertainment, promotion, utilities for the building, guest singers, and so forth. It adds up to quite a sum.

*My goals as a pastor are fixed on the spiritual growth of the people God has made me responsible for. I am convinced a camping experience can move them closer to God's purpose than whatever I might do in the service they miss.*

Now measure the results, not only at the moment, but down the line. Compare the fruit of a church campaign with camp. I don't suggest that campaigns are not worthy, I only plead that the cost of helping young people get to camp be put in perspective. Camp help is surely an acceptable missionary investment.

Some churches offer a week at camp to any youngster who wishes to go. Parents are invited to give what they can and the church writes a check for total registrations. Other churches pay a fixed percentage of all fees, granting additional help where needed.

We have tried the camp barrel plan, allowing parents to drop camper registrations in a container with whatever they can pay toward the cost. We invite everyone to give toward camp costs, helping all who wish to enjoy a week at camp.

Assorted incentives have been employed to motivate youngsters toward camp. Some churches and camps honor Bible memorization with camp scholarships. Others recognize faithful Sunday school attendance by camp scholarships. Camps may assist by offering registration discounts for recruiting new campers. A long list of promotion and incentive ideas can be gathered from churches that work at camping.

One surprising factor is evident almost everywhere: Money is not the major problem! Often more scholarship help is available than there are campers willing to use it.

Yet we have more camp prospects in our churches than available camp space could possibly accommodate. One study made by a denomination strong on camping discovered that fewer than 25 percent of its children and youth of camping age attended any camp. Life holds so many appealing distractions that

millions of boys and girls from our churches miss the benefits of camp each year. That is a challenge each church must face.

†††


Inertia exists at all levels. How do we break the inertia barrier? Surely every pastor knows of several good things he should be doing, but isn't because he simply runs out of push. By some mysterious principle good causes fade, whether choirs, youth groups, Sunday schools, or camping. The mix of leadership and opportunity that led to a surge of enthusiasm and growth passes and the magic is gone. Most often you will find a person at the core. A job change called a family away and momentum was lost.

But camping is too important to leave dormant or dead. For a time it may be necessary to load the church program with camp. Skits in Sunday school, Sunday evening camp nights, camping themes for dinners, camping decor in the fellowship hall (why not the sanctuary?).

I once spoke at a banquet where the leaders had transformed the church basement into a camp. Trees were propped in the corners. A small tent, complete with glowing campfire, occupied the far end of the room. A canoe with paddles and packs rested near one wall. Photos, drawings, and last year's camp slides added their flavor. I don't know why they hauled me across the country to tell stories!

Taking groups on a camp visit in the off season has promotional value. Kids are wary of new experiences and unfamiliar territory. Seeing the camp makes them more comfortable with the idea of spending a week there. If you can move the whole group campward, your chances of success with shy individuals are greatly increased.

Fall, winter, and spring retreats, especially for older campers, can strengthen the camping tradition in your church. One-day outings for several churches might be arranged. Family camp offers special promotional benefits. Children and youth who enjoy camp with their parents, and make friends with other kids at camp, are likely to sign up for next summer on their own.

The strongest promotion remains a person like Bible Camp Bill, an adult loved and trusted by the campers. When that person offers to take a group to camp and spends the week with them, the promotion becomes almost irresistible. 

## TO ORDER

*Camping and the Church* (CCI/USA Focus Series 13); copyright © 1993, 1997 by CCI/USA. Focus Series monographs may not be reproduced without permission.

Other Focus Series articles available from CCI/USA include: *Taking the Church Outdoors*, *Seven Steps for Effective Retreats*, and *Creative Discipleship Options for Your Local Church*. The more than 25 titles in the Focus Series may be combined to give you the best possible price. CCI/USA member quantity discounts are as follows:

1-10 copies – current unit price  
11-25 copies – 10 percent discount  
26-99 copies – 20 percent discount  
100 or more – 30 percent discount

Prices subject to change without notice. For more information, a current list of CCI/USA resources and prices, and/or non-member rates, please contact us:

P.O. Box 62189  
Colorado Springs,  
CO 80962-2189  
Phone: (719) 260-9400  
Fax: (719) 260-6398  
E-mail: [cciusa@cciusa.org](mailto:cciusa@cciusa.org)  
Web: <http://www.cciusa.org/>

