



LIFE TOGETHER

The Christian life is more likely to be caught than taught. And the highly contagious atmosphere of camps is a great place to catch it, says Fred Gollasch.

This is a précis of an article by Fred Gollasch in *"The Lutheran" March 2004, and is used with permission.*

I remember the days when, as a small, shy teenage boy, I sat in the long grass on the banks of the Murray River near Albury during the NSW Summer Camp. It was dry and hot and the flies were annoying. I vividly remember studying the red-headed Bible study leader, who seemed twice my age. I can still see her face. I looked and listened as she led the group, and I thought to myself: 'I wonder if I could ever do that'.

Little did I know that God had plans to use camping to masterfully change my life through his Spirit. He worked through older youth who mentored me, and I eventually became the state youth president. In later life God called me to be the manager of Warrambui Retreat and Conference Centre, outside Canberra. The fifteen years that my wife Inta and I have been at Warrambui have been an amazing journey of God's grace and blessing. A dedicated camping community provides for its staff a 'pressure cooker' experience that can lead to rapid growth and discipleship. I am in awe of God and of the young leaders that he is raising up in our churches through camping.

Camping has always provided excellent opportunities to share the gospel. When people are removed from the crutches of modern society, when they have time to stop and think, when they are surrounded by the natural beauty of God's creation, when they are building new relationships, when the gospel is not only spoken but also modeled, they are more ready to listen to their Maker: 'Be still and know that I am God'.

It has been exciting to watch camping grow to a new level. Gerry Manlove (a Lutheran with four decades of involvement in all levels of camping) writes in his excellent work *A Common Book of Camping*: 'Much has changed over the years: the size of camps, the range of populations served and the scope of programming offered. Camp directors find their responsibilities expanding rapidly, as more staff and programs are added, and budgets and development plans become increasingly complex. It's a whole new ball game out there.'

In almost every corner of the planet Christian camping is making a huge impact. Yet many people in the church are unaware of the great work that God's Spirit is doing through camping. Bob McKerney, director of Okutama Bible Chalet in Japan says: 'As a tool for evangelism and discipleship, few methods, if any, rival the camping ministry for effectiveness'. Even in the Middle East the impact is significant. In Jordan every evangelical church has a pastor who became a Christian by attending Camp Gilead in his youth.

Each year more than one million Australians are guests at Christian camp sites, conference centres and outdoor programs. More than half of them are school children, who get precious little exposure to Christianity anywhere else.

One interesting strand of camping is the work with Year 10 students in outdoor education centres owned by Lutheran colleges in Queensland. Year 10 students attend camp for four to five weeks at a time. Their character is developed through having to do their own cooking and cleaning, and surviving in a no-frills environment with no TV, radio or modern conveniences. They have solo expeditions, hike for three to four days at a time and complete challenging activities. These students experience firsthand the importance of forgiveness and tolerance, which gives staff a 'down to earth' opportunity to share the gospel. One former student, now the manager of a large department store, returned to one of these centres and told the director that he would not have that job if he had not gone to camp and found self-confidence and new friendships. With

tears in her eyes another student, a school captain, announced on her school's speech night that the camping experience had changed her life.

One of the greatest joys of camp ministry is seeing what God is doing through our youth. God works in many and varied ways.

- We know God is at work when a youth leader comes for prayer, throws his arms around you and sobs tears of pain and anguish as he cries out for a right relationship with his Lord.
- We know God is at work when fifteen-year-old girls at camp tearfully share how they desperately need more youth camps; there they get the love, support and teaching to combat the pull of drugs, sex and other idols in the world.
- We know God is at work when we see youth at camp praying for their friends in need, even though prayer time is not on the program.
- We know God is at work when we see lives change and disciples grow over the years, when we see awkward, difficult teenagers struggle to become mature mentors of others.

Youth have always been passionate, but today we are seeing a new breed. They are shunning the values of the materialistic world that many of us cling to, taking up their cross and following Jesus. They worship God in a way that the older generation finds hard to identify with. The mark of their lives is the bearing of fruit in the work of God's kingdom.

Camping ministry is a huge commitment. Camp staff have little time for normal personal life. Many hardly know what a weekend is. The average Christian camp-site manager in Australia lasts three years in the role, only a few hang in for the long haul. Camping staff and the committees that support them need your prayers, your patronage and your interest. It is tough, but it is also a privilege and it has its rewards. God reaches the staff through the tough times, grows them and helps them to see more clearly. A South Australian centre staff member said: 'I eventually found in the dictionary the word I needed to describe my experience at this camp: Epiphany—a manifestation of God, a sudden complete understanding'.

When we ask young leaders emerging from camp ministry what camping did for them, the common response is: '**I was a Christian when I first came to camps, but I did not know God personally. Now I know him and want to walk with him day by day.**'

These young leaders are the hope of the church and the nation. We are reaching youth through camping; we must do more to reach them through our congregations.

Camping provides the church with excellent opportunities for reaching the lost with the gospel. **Most people choose when young the pathway they will follow.** Many young people see the churches as not being relevant to them but youth camps are.

The world has a powerful and deadly message for young people today: 'The only thing that matters is your happiness. Cut loose, enjoy yourself. It doesn't matter what you do to others, or what your morals are, just take care of Number One.' The Christ, the Son of the Living God, has a different message: 'Take up your cross and follow me'. Many are doing that, through camping, and we rejoice. Rejoice with us!

Dr Fred Gollasch is a teacher and educator. He and his wife Inta have been the managers of Warrambui Retreat and Conference Centre for fifteen years. Warrambui is a member of CCI Australia. Fred has been an active member of the Lutheran Church for most of his life. He was the NSW District Youth President and has just completed thirteen years on NSW District Church Council and on General Church Council as NSW lay representative.

Christian Camping Works!!!

A recent survey of the 200+ young people of a large Sydney Church found that more than 60% indicated that they gave their lives to Christ at a Church Camp or Weekend Conference!!!!