

The Value of Christian Camping in Australia - 2005.

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Christian Camping in Australia.

Christian Camping, as it may be defined by current practice in Australia, is any number of experiences that provide an opportunity for a group of people, with a common interest, to go away from their usual environment and live in a "community", within which authentic Christian and Moral lifestyles can be modelled. This "temporary community" provides opportunities (of varying duration) for formal and informal evangelism and discipleship, in accommodation ranging from basic tenting to more comfortable Conference and Retreat Centre facilities.

As expressed so well by the USA's Christian Camp and Conference Association - "Camping has long been considered one of Christianity's most effective mediums for impacting lives and growing the Church. For decades, clergy and lay leaders in all denominations have realized that the spiritually focused, challenge-oriented temporary community inherent in Christian camping is unsurpassed for igniting faith, instilling character, and implanting ideals in participants, regardless of age or background. Christian camping is also considered by many to be the best means for inspiring an individual to a life of service.

Today; in Australia; camps, conference centres and similar entities are constantly being used - with great effectiveness - for Christian outreach, spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing. Annually across the spectrum of Australian Christian Camps and Conference Centres tens of thousands of people, young and old, attend over 210 CCI/A sites taking part in traditional and unusual programs throughout the year; thousands make significant spiritual decisions during or following the experience. A recent estimate suggests well over 8,000 decisions for Christ are made annually through Christian Camping.

In the past year:

- Over 1,000,000 million people visited CCI/A sites in Australia
- Over 60% were School Children
- The vast majority of these School Children did not set foot inside another Christian establishment
- Most had opportunity to hear the Gospel Message, or to see it presented

If for no other reason Christian Camps must remain open.

Statistics indicate

- Over 80% of adults in church today became Christians in their teens
- As many as 60% of young adults who profess Christianity first made commitments at camps and conference centres (in the USA this is quoted at 85%)
- In one denomination the evangelical outreach ministry with the highest number of commitments across eastern Australia is through activities at its camp & conference centres.

Despite these indications some within the Australian Christian community are claiming, "the day of camps has past". Regretfully some organisations have already closed centres, for a variety of reasons, usually concentrating on an attempt to place an economic value on the property and its continued operation. This document provides reasons for camps and their boards to reconsider and re-evaluate their vital ministry.

Recently a group of over 200 young adults (18-24 years old) from a Northern Sydney Church were asked where they made commitments for Christ, over 60% indicated that they had done so at a camp or conference. These 120+ young people, and thousands more around the country, know the true value of Christian Camping.

Given that such large numbers of young people have come to the Lord through Christian Camping, and no viable alternative ministry is proposed, it is clear that the future of Christianity in Australia is largely dependent on the continuation of a strong Christian Camping ministry.

What then is the essence of Christian Camping, and why has it been so effective?

Across the Christian Camping scene in Australia there would be almost as many philosophies of camping as there are camps. However, above it all there are significant re-occurring themes that underpin the majority of Christian Camping Ministries:

1. Seek to make Christ known through the ministry
2. Provide a place of beauty and tranquillity to enhance spiritual and physical enrichment.
3. Offer a variety of programs and facilities that enable 1 & 2.

Making Christ known is common to all Christian Ministry, so the effectiveness of Christian Camping rests in the second and third elements. Pioneers established camps in places that they thought would be different, create an interest, allow for peace and quiet, allow for excitement, and allow for challenge. Then programs were developed that built on what was available at the centre, creating more that was different from living at home and worshiping traditionally. In these differences and challenges people were offered opportunities to dig deeper into their souls and discover their true relationships, with each other, with themselves and with God.

These elements are still on offer through Christian Camping today. They are as effective today as they were in the past. There are recent articles supporting this view later in this document.

John Ashmen of CCCA-USA, speaking to a Sydney Camping Leadership Forum in July 2005 challenged the delegates to re-consider the "Power of Place". He indicated that the move to providing more activity and noise had resulted in less effective Gospel presentation. He indicated that a concentration on quietness and reflection is gaining momentum in camping circles in the USA as people find the rate of change in the modern world overwhelming and need to escape. People are starting to seek out the rustic and remote as a means of escaping from the rush.

In an August 2005 presentation to CCI/A members in Queensland the Department of Education indicated a desire to cooperate with CCI Sites in providing Outdoor Education opportunities. The Department has 21 of its own camps but they turn away as much work as they take. What an opportunity!

Thus the way is open for more camps and conference centres, not less. Hundreds of sites have been used through the years, and many continue to this day. All organisations that are currently operating such ministries need to be encouraged to recognise the value of their ministry, and work to develop it further.

Many sites commence with great zeal and focus, but due to changing boards, and loss of vision many lose their way and can become little more than "budget" group accommodation establishments. Where this happens the ministry is greatly reduced and will likely result in closure.

However, as will be seen by the references below, this ministry is vital when effective. A centre that has its purpose re-focussed will flourish and be effective in Ministry. John Ashmen challenged camping leaders to focus their ministries, determine who and what they exist for, and then work strategically towards those goals.

Christian Camping is the most effective evangelistic ministry in Australia today. It provides immense social and physical benefits as well. Tied with its opportunity to work closely with the education system this is a ministry that must be encouraged.

I have included a series of extracts from a variety of Australian and Overseas sources that clearly show the Value of Christian Camping today. Pray that it will continue effectively for years to come.

Ken Pullen
3rd September 2005.

Australian Material:

Some Numbers:

The current Christian Camping Ministry in Australia consists of

- Over 21,000 beds in over 250 centres
- Over 1,000,000 guests per year
- Over 5,000 million meals served
- Over 2,000 people employed full and part time
- **Uncountable** opportunities to present the Gospel Message.

Michelle Underwood, writing in Matthias Media's "The Briefing" in January 2005, indicated that Christian Camping to young people is a unique ministry as:

1. The Bible is taught every day
2. There is ample opportunity for people to ask questions and get answers
3. The Christian life is on display, lived out 24 hours a day
4. Christian Camps show that a great time can be had without drugs and alcohol
5. Young Christians can be equipped for leadership
6. There is just more time to have input and build relationships
7. Younger Christians can be encouraged in evangelism
8. Young people can be reached who would never set foot inside a church building
9. Camps can reach more than just those who attend

The full article may be read at <http://www.cci.org.au/pdf/0205-saving-souls.pdf> thanks to Matthias Media.

Michelle also produced a brochure for CCI Australia asking "How long has it been since you went away with your Church?". This outlined the reasons for Churches to take time away from their regular programs to go away.

1. It builds relationships
 - a. Concentrated time together
 - b. Barriers are broken, learn more about each other
2. It changes lives
 - a. Being away has allowed many to experience profound change
 - b. Thousands have come to the Lord through camping
3. It enhances spiritual growth
 - a. Ample time for creativity
 - b. People are relaxed
 - c. Time or reflection and learning
4. It promotes service
 - a. Use of gifts
 - b. Encouragement to assist reveals other gifts, and continuing service

The full brochure may be downloaded from <http://www.cciaus.org.au/pdf/HLHIB.pdf>

Dr Fred Gollasch wrote in "The Lutheran" in March 2004. *"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".*

Dr Gollasch goes on to say *"It has been exciting to watch camping grow to a new level. 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.*

Dr Gollasch writes *"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.

Full article <http://www.cciaus.org.au/pdf/Lifetogether.pdf>

Dr Gollasch does recognise that Camping has changed, and sometimes is more difficult than previously – he quotes Gerry Manlove (a Lutheran with four decades of involvement in all levels of camping) from 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.'*

Jodie McNeill Ministry Trainee with Blakehurst Anglican Church Sydney wrote the following on 23/05/05: **Take your teenagers away and reap the benefits - Jodie McNeill**

The full article may be read at

http://www.sydneyan Anglicans.net/mission/missionthinking/take_your_teenagers_away_and_reap_the_benefits_jodie_mcneill/

In the article McNeill says: *"A youth group camp in term three last year helped build relationships within the diverse group of Christian teenagers.... Camps are one of the most powerful tools in youth ministry. A weekend away is equivalent to half a year of ministry... in both contact and impact.*

Camps achieve many great purposes. They build community, can help introduce change, or even assist in helping teenagers 'graduate' to the next age youth group.

One of the greatest benefits of camps is their ability to provide a powerful tool for mission to outsiders.

Camps truly are a slice of heaven. Don't miss out on this great opportunity for nurture and mission of teenagers!

Di Brinkworth is featured in an article on camping for special needs kids in SA on the Wesley Central Missions website:

<http://www.wesleymission.org.au/publications/impact/easter03.asp#Diis%20decade%20of%20Christian%20camping>

Di, who is a volunteer who has coordinated 21 camps over 10 years at a centre in SA is quoted as saying: *"It is incredible to see some of these kids come to realise that they are loved by God,"* Di said. *"Some of them have been convinced that they are unlovable and have never been to church or known about Jesus. To see God move in their hearts is an incredible experience".*

"Seeing their faces light up when they come back is very rewarding. I find a deep sense of satisfaction when the kids I have led on camp develop into Christian leaders, and return to lead others as volunteer leaders."

Victorian Baptist Union presents the following on their web site:

http://www.buv.com.au/int_camping.html

Vision

Through the uniqueness of Camping, we create opportunities to enable people to grow, to form community and experience God.

Values

We value the nurturing of relationships and the building of community:

We value the presenting of Christ:

We value time-out in the midst of busy lifestyles:

We value human growth and the building of life skills:

We value facilities:

We value Christian service:

We value the church of Jesus Christ:

International Material:

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.

Camp Bethel in the US presents the following:-

Their extraordinary web site is found at <http://www.campbethelvirginia.org/philosophy.htm>

- **Camping** is a vital part of the church's total mission. By its very nature, camping affords unique living and learning opportunities to persons of all ages. Camping compliments the year-round work of the local church as it ministers to its members and reaches out to touch lives of others who are not directly involved in the life of the local church.
- **Church camping** involves persons in a significant way with the natural, outdoor surroundings and is characterized by a balance between outdoor and indoor experiences. Uncomplicated living in the natural environment provides a setting conducive to the development and practice of the Christian spirit. Through the action/reflection process, so natural to a camp setting, campers come to deeper understandings of God's word. Campers are involved in activities which evoke praise of God and which help them discover the will of God.
- **Group living**, 24 hours a day, provides opportunities for living in and experiencing a Christian community. A mature Christian counsellor, sensitive to the needs of each camper, provides necessary guidance to help campers explore God's world and God's word and test its implications for their lives.
- **Church camping** provides an away-from-home experience with everyday situations and distractions left behind. Such a setting is conducive to new and maturing growth experiences for staff and campers.
- **Church camping**, in establishing a Christian community, provides opportunities for persons from diverse backgrounds to develop understanding and appreciation for each other, and to discover and explore the meaning of reconciliation. In such a community, personal relationships are faced, and the use and abuse of all of the created order becomes real. The responsibility that each person had for others has new meaning and persons are encouraged to accept or strive for his or her own place in the totality of created order.
- **Church camping** accepts its responsibility to provide a quality program, safe facilities, and to utilize practices which are honest and professional. It also recognizes its obligation to cooperate with related disciplines in the constant process of self-evaluation. While recognizing its relationship to the larger field of camping, staff cannot lose sight of the unique mission of Christ's church in expressing God's reconciling and redeeming love to a broken world through church camping.

Camp Wightman in the US presents the following:-

Their website is at <http://www.campwightman.org/Why%20Camp.html>

The benefits of camping

- An opportunity for growth
- Development of self-esteem
- Fun
- The chance to learn in a different way –Camp mixes all of these different modes of learning into a day's activities, stimulating campers and stretching them.
- A chance to interact with non-parental adult role models. Camp may be a camper's first opportunity to make friends with an adult.
- An experience in the outdoors – our modern lives are becoming more and more detached from the environment around us so that many children are growing up without any real knowledge or experience of the natural world.

Why should a Christian camp be the choice of Christian people?

- A week of Christian camping is equivalent to an entire year of Sunday School.
- Camp is designed to create relationships in which faith is expressed and shared.
- How many people have the opportunity to join in worship and singing every day of the week?
- Christian camping in an outdoor setting, takes the experience of the natural world a step further. It makes the connection for campers between the creation and the creator – a creator who not only made the world, but also made each person and calls them to a life of faithfulness and service.

- An experience of living in Christian community – camp is designed for the formation of community. Within Christian community faith is shared, challenges are faced, forgiveness is required and is offered.

Christian Net website presents the following:

Their website is at <http://christian.christianet.com/christiancamps.htm>

Christian Camps

Christian camps are a great resource. They are located all over the world and specialize in different things that make their camp unique. There are camps that are specific and cater to certain denominations whereas other Christian camps deal with just sharing the message of Christ through the uniqueness of camping. A Christian camp allows people to connect and interact with one another, regardless of where you may live.

Canada Christianity website presents the following:-

Their website http://www.canadianchristianity.com/cgi-bin/na.cgi?mf_summer_05/02great

John Redekop is board chair and development officer of Stillwood Camp and Retreat Centre, Lindell Beach, B.C.

Excerpts of his article "The Great Promise of Christian Camping" include:

ACROSS CANADA, Christian camping is flourishing. Where else do the unchurched readily pay to get into a Christian setting? Where else do the unchurched seek out the church and beg to come under its tutelage? Where else do church and unchurched children and youth come in such large numbers that the facilities often cannot accommodate them?

It's not only the children and young people who crowd our summer camps. Many thousands of people of all ages attend off-season retreats and other short-term endeavours. Like the summer campers, some of these come to faith - and many are nurtured to have a deeper walk with God. Of course, the staff members also benefit from their involvement. Unfortunately, a number of churches have not yet perceived this reality.

Why has Christian camping become so successful as an outreach and nurturing arm of the church? Six vital dimensions come to mind.

The total person: minister to all three components of a person - body, mind and soul. Christian camping is committed to doing so - and does so in a natural, integrated manner.

Creating community Christian camping is designed to create genuine community... By enabling campers and counsellors to understand and participate in an authentic Christian community, a Christian camp enriches these people for the rest of their lives. And this experience is especially important as the traditional family, the most basic community, weakens.

Generating relationships A Christian camp models and teaches kindness, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, gratitude, respect, honesty, being other-oriented, learning how to deal with temptation and understanding that love is more a decision than a feeling. In their play, worship, dining, project activities and lessons, campers come to realize a cardinal Christian truth: it's not how much we know or do, but how much we love that counts most.

The 24-hour-a-day relationships experienced in one week of camping add up to more time than youth pastors have with their charges during an entire year - and also more than most parents spend with their children in six months!

Closer to God Here we encounter the heart of the Christian camping experience.

Lasting memories Camping is not a spectator or individualistic sport. ... create memories and relationships that last for decades or even a lifetime.

Producing leaders Where else do young people encounter major blocks of time, in a Christian environment, to experience character and leadership development?

Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches website presents the following:-

Their website <http://www.fgbc.org/welcome/info-fgbc/2005-05-11/2005-05-04camp.htm>

- After all: "Camping is the church's most promising means for winning children and youth to Christ and guiding them toward spiritual growth," said Lloyd Mattson, a pastor, camp leader and Christian camping expert, in a 1998 edition of "Christian Camping Today."
- Ed Lewis, executive director of the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches' CE National, has said, "Christian camping provides the greatest opportunity for evangelism and Christian education available to the church today."
- Also, by promoting Christian camping within your church and, when possible, offering scholarship programs to enable campers to attend, there may ultimately be many rich rewards. Campers may find an environment where they can make commitments to Christ and decisions to grow in their faith. Adult staff members may find the training and confidence they need to come back to their home churches and become actively involved in ministry. And the church can provide continuity for the camper by offering yearlong discipleship, while also giving adults greater training in their ministry areas.

Bibliography:

Material sourced from articles and websites mentioned plus the following;

Christian Camp and Conference Association USA_ <http://www.ccca-us.org>

CCI Australia <http://www.cciaus.org.au>

CCI Worldwide <http://www.cci.org.au>