

What Makes Christian Camping So Effective?

A pastor once told me that his young people experience more spiritual growth in a few days at camp than in a whole year of attendance at Sunday School. Others, pastors and missionaries alike, have made similar comments in my hearing. Perhaps the pastor's remark is an overstatement. And in no way am I speaking against the tremendous value of the Sunday School. But who would question the fact that as a tool for evangelism and discipleship few methods, if any, rival the camp ministry for effectiveness. Why is that? What is it about camp that brings about such profound and often quick results?

From my own experience and reading, and in discussions with others I've been able to identify eight reasons. This is not to say other methods are invalid or should be abandoned in favour of camping. We need to take advantage of all the methods God has made available to us. I also want to state clearly at the outset that I believe Christian camping, like other para-church ministries, exists for the church and is valid only to the extent that it contributes to the growth of the churches both numerically and spiritually.

1. Concentration

Camping is effective, first, because it is a concentrated ministry of God's word. Truth is taught, explained, demonstrated and reinforced over and over - and in many different ways. Chapel messages, morning devotions, discussions, counselling sessions, Bible studies, drama, testimonies, music and campfires are some of the most obvious. Add to that the less structured witness of Christian staff and campers, and this sheer concentration, all taken together, has tremendous power to affect change.

2. Time

Camp life is a 24-hour-a-day experience of living together over a period of several days. Unlike an evangelistic meeting, banquet or concert, camping gives people time to relax and unwind. People often need an extended period of time to absorb truth and think through its implications. They need time to build meaningful relationships and open up. And most need time to make major, life-changing decisions.

3. Group Living

At camp, the message is not only presented, but modelled. Though there is a body of truth we Christians believe, Christianity is not only facts to be learned, but truth to be lived (love, submission, trust, forgiveness). It is primarily a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but it is lived out in the context of human relationships (friends, enemies, family, authorities). The skilled counsellor sees quarrels, winning and losing, loneliness, or just having fun as opportunities for imparting biblical principles every bit as valid as the formal teaching times. Sharing, for example, is better taught with eight hungry kids around a platter of spaghetti than in a dozen sermons. This may be the closest we come to emulating Christ's ministry of discipling.

4. Awayness

The camp setting and environment also contribute to its effectiveness. Camping takes people away from the noise, demands, routines, and pressures of daily life. It removes them from the constant onslaught of the world's influence which comes via TV, magazines, family, friends, unsaved teachers, etc.

5. Purpose

Another factor which contributes greatly to the effectiveness of a camping program is what is called "single purpose administration". Not only is the camper removed from a godless society with all of its influence, but he is brought into a safe, wholesome, Christ-centred environment of caring, acceptance, fun, learning, and relaxation. The use of time, the content and methods of teaching or recreation, who is placed in what room, what campers are to bring or leave home, the meals, the campsite, and much more - all are under the control of the leadership, and all are planned to achieve a specific purpose.

I was shocked once to be accused of "brainwashing campers like the cults" by the use of this almost total control of the environment. Indeed, we do need to exercise caution not to cross a line whereby we pressure or coerce people into making decisions against their will. But used correctly this purposeful control is a good thing.

6. Staff

Camp is a place where growing Christians can influence others with teaching, listening, sharing, playing together, warning, or just showing love and acceptance. The role of the counsellor will vary depending on the situation. He or she becomes at times everything from hero, judge, or policeman, to teacher, friend, or object of a prank. But always he or she is a living demonstration of the truth of the gospel. The number one priority in planning for a camp is staff selection. Why? Because example is at the heart of discipleship. Campers can close their hearts to our proclamation, but not to the impact of sincere and radiant Christian example.

7. Nature

God's creation is often called the second Bible. God not only speaks through nature, but uses it to open our hearts. Take a walk through a forest glade, along the beach, or by a quiet stream. Sit by a lake or climb to a mountain peak. You will find that your heart becomes more receptive to God's truth. Thoughts of eternity, the meaning of life, or the greatness of God come flooding over us. Look out your window right now. What can you see of God's creation? You will probably find it already mentioned in the Bible. Think of how much Jesus used nature in his teaching. Camping, more than any other method, brings us into close contact with nature. The tragedy is that so many camping programs fail to take full advantage of this resource.

8. Fun

"How was camp?" we ask. "It was great; we all had a good time," they reply. Is that the measure of a "good" or "successful" camp? No, of course not. Yet, on the other hand, one can have a successful seminar or meeting without fun, but not a successful camp. Camping by its nature should be a fun-filled experience. This, more than any other reason, is why campers attend. And therein lies the secret of its effectiveness. People who are genuinely enjoying themselves have open hearts - to those around them and to their message. The reverse is also true.

Any one of the factors mentioned above makes the camping ministry effective. But taken together they overlap and reinforce each other, resulting in a ministry almost unparalleled in effectiveness. In this article I've limited myself to the use of camp for evangelism and discipleship, but the potential is much broader. In the camp setting, under mature leadership, campers can develop physically, emotionally, and socially as well as spiritually. Are you taking advantage of this ministry? Don't just settle for a retreat or two during the church year. Lead a group of young people into the mountains for a campout. Also make use of the programs offered by the Christian camps in your area. You will find a wide variety of programs to choose from. Camping may turn out to be the most effective thing you try this year.