


SCOTT NOBLE

GONE CAMPing

The big impact of time away



as a high-school student, Irene first attended camp through a program designed for at-risk youth. Coming from San Bernardino County, California, home to one of the highest gang populations in the area, she attended Mountain Adventure Camp at Alpine Camp and Conference Center in Blue Jay, California. The camp is designed to introduce young people to Jesus Christ in a setting that invites them to experience God's kingdom.

After Irene attended camp, she came back as a camp counselor.

"We saw her become more confident, more self-assured, more secure in her gifts and her ministry," says Dave Zepeda, ministry advancement manager at Alpine Camp. "She worked hard in our food service department, and she also served as a volunteer counselor during her

summer here. We've seen her grow and mature and become a wonderful young lady with a lot of potential and a willingness to go further."

Now Irene attends community college and plans to compose music.

"I would say Irene is one of our many success stories in that regard—well on her way to becoming an asset to her local church and to her family and those that know her," Zepeda says. She is just one individual whose life was changed by camp.

Each summer, more than 18,000 campers visit the twenty-one Covenant camps in the United States and Canada. Covenant camps also operate in Chile, Colombia, Congo, Ecuador, Mexico, Japan, Russia, and Thailand.

In addition, during the off-season (between September and May) camps are used for various kinds

Alpine Camp, California

...everything a camper has been taught—or not—about faith is put to the test at camp.

of retreats, outdoor education programs, and team-building activities. More than 1,000 people work at the denomination's camps and retreat centers, serving full-time or as summer staff and counselors.

While the camps vary in size and the programs they offer, their missions are similar: to come alongside the church and help develop leaders, assist with spiritual development, and work to bring individuals into the body of Christ.

Changed Lives

When Efrem Smith was sixteen, he was riding his bike past the neighborhood Methodist church in south Minneapolis. The church was conducting an outreach event, and Smith stopped to listen as civil rights leader John Perkins was speaking. Through that event, Smith became involved with the youth group at that church, and every winter, the church organized a high-school retreat at Covenant Pines Bible Camp in McGregor, Minnesota, which Smith attended.

"I went to the altar at that outreach event, but I really didn't know the full implications of it or really pray the prayer of salvation with

somebody until I went to Covenant Pines Camp," Smith recalls. Now superintendent of the Pacific South-west Conference, Smith identifies those early experiences as his first exposure to the Covenant Church.

Smith returned to Covenant Pines each year through high school and then as a counselor when he was in college. The camp "not only played a significant role in my own spiritual formation as a Christian," he says, "but also played a role in my leadership development and my getting clarity of call into ministry."

Mark Stromberg tells a similar story. He grew up at First Covenant Church in downtown Minneapolis and began attending Covenant Pines Bible Camp when he was young. During his first year of Trailblazer camp, he committed his life to God. During his second year of camp he sensed a call to the ministry.

"I might have been ten years old or eleven years old," he says. "I was in the chapel and sitting in the second pew back on the left, kind of right by the window that was looking out over the lake. The speaker that year actually said, 'Someday God is going to call some of you into full-time



Christian service.' And I remember just looking out the window at the lake and with absolute clarity just thinking to myself, 'That's me.'" Now superintendent of the Northwest Conference, Stromberg points to his camp experience as influential in developing the spiritual maturity and leadership skills he needed to become a pastor and denominational leader.

For others, camp—alongside their local church—helped them to understand the full implications of the gospel, guided them through difficult life circumstances, and helped mold them into followers of Christ.

Growing Spiritually

"A week at camp is a microcosm of the body of Christ," says Joel Rude, associate director of Alpine Camp and Conference Center. Campers live together in close proximity and have the opportunity to make decisions together as a group, work out conflict, and develop caring friendships. "It's like a family," Rude adds. "They're putting this 'love one another' idea into practice."

Although a young person may only spend a few days at a time at camp, the compressed time frame can actually enhance opportunities for spiritual growth. Students live in the word daily. They listen to Scriptures being taught, process what they're learning with their counselors, and often talk about it with their peers as well. They

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Cascades Camp, Washington

get a chance to try out living the way Scripture tells them to.

Camps also offer experiential learning—one of their biggest assets. “When you have a ropes course and a paint ball course and other types of tools like we have at our disposal, we intentionally push to use those as great teaching tools, if not evangelistic tools as well,” says John Gehring, executive director of Alpine Camp.

Through such activities, campers also learn to recognize their gifts and where God may be leading them. Camp offers unique ways to identify one’s calling. Sometimes people assume

that leadership—especially in the church—is encompassed entirely by the positions of pastor or worship leader. Yet God develops and uses leaders in a variety of settings and with a variety of gifts—and camp is the place where many young people start to see that for the first time. Smith adds that his experience at Covenant Pines opened up a “bigger world of opportunity to do ministry” when he realized that God often calls

people to roles other than pastor.

Campers also develop spiritually at camp through opportunities to fail. While they get lots of chances to succeed, they also learn how to deal with disappointment in a safe and caring setting.

Lifelong camper Aune Carlson says, “I think it’s important for people to be given the opportunity sometimes to stumble and know that it’s okay and the whole world doesn’t rest on



Covenant Bible Camp, Alaska

The Camping and Missions Partnership KAREN YEVERSKY

Covenant camping has partnered with Covenant World Mission since the very beginning of its history. In the early years, missionaries volunteered as speakers, medical staff, and counselors in fledgling camp programs throughout the country. When the Middle East Conference (now the Great Lakes Conference) held camping programs at rental facilities in the 1930s, missionary doctor Theodora “Teddy” Johnson served as camp health director while home on furlough from the Congo. Grace Vennberg, a camper in 1938, recalls hearing Dr. Teddy teach from a boat during a Galilean service. “It had a big impact,” says Vennberg, whose interest in missions and camping remains strong.

Records dating back to 1967 show a variety of mission field projects supported by camper offerings. In the early 1990s, the Association of Covenant Camps and Conference Centers (ACCCC) worked to coordinate efforts of camps in the United States and Canada with needs identified by the Department of World Mission, and specifically to direct offerings toward Covenant camp programs in other countries when possible. Since 1993, campers have given more than \$950,000 to projects in ten different countries, as well as to camps in Alaska and rural Virginia.

The partnership also includes visits to international camps and staff exchanges. Work trips and advisory visits to camps in Mexico,

Russia, and Thailand have been organized. And individual camps have developed partnerships with camps in Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Connecting camps and missions builds the church on the world mission field and here at home. Curt Peterson, executive minister of world mission, wrote in a 2006 report, “Funds raised through the years have been significant in helping our national churches continue making progress toward fulfilling the great commission in their own countries and enabling their churches to grow in fellowship.”

As campers hear firsthand accounts of God’s miraculous work and the world’s great needs, some are compelled to respond. When Phil Landin, Grace Vennberg’s great-nephew, was in junior high, he was struck by a missionary’s description of a malnourished child. “It was the first time missions became real to me and it triggered a desire to do ministry,” he says. Now a senior at North Park University, Landin plans to pursue a career in world missions. He exemplifies the impact of what happens when camping and world missions join together to do God’s work. ■

Karen Yeverky is a member of Zion Covenant Church in Jamestown, New York, and former director of Mission Meadows Bible Camp in Dewittville, New York.



Mission Springs Camp, California

your shoulders, but next time we'll try this." She adds, "It gives them a little more ease and maybe then they'll take it to the next level."

Carlson grew up going to Portage Lake Covenant Bible Camp in Onekama, Michigan, as a young child and through high school. Eventually she returned as a counselor and also worked at Covenant Bible Camp in Unalakleet, Alaska. Now she serves as the coordinator of youth and young adult ministries in the Department of Christian Formation.

She explains that another aspect of the formative influence of camp is the leveling effect of sharing community together. "I saw the camp director taking out trash just like the rest of us," she says. "I think that's one valuable thing of seeing how everybody pitches in when something needs to get done. When a student would get hurt, whoever was nearest was the first to respond. It wasn't 'whose responsibility it this?' It's always a 'help one another' kind of a setting, which I think is a really special thing."

Such shared experience and responsibility helps campers understand the significance of the body of Christ in a tangible way. Each person may have different gifts and abilities, but each one serves in some way. Those differences can become an important teaching component since campers come from a variety of backgrounds. While some kids arrive from healthy, Christian homes, others come from more difficult situations.

Camp offers students a reprieve from their daily lives. "A student's life back home could be a broken home, an abusive home, a fine home," Rude

The Challenges Camps Face Today

GREGG HUNTER

The average teenager sends and receives 3,417 text messages a month, according to a Nielson report published in December. Children up to the age of eight spend an average of one hour and forty minutes watching television or DVDs a day, according to research done by Common Sense Media. The average child spends 623 minutes a week on a computer and 1,880 minutes a week playing video games.

Clearly for many young people, accustomed to being constantly "plugged in," the idea of "getting away from it all" may feel like deprivation. Leaving behind their tech toys for a week of camp may seem like an utterly foreign idea. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that this is one of the challenges camps face in drawing a new generation of campers.

Cost is also a hurdle. It's hard to find an industry that has not been negatively impacted by the struggling economy of the last several years, and both camps and campers have felt the pinch. It's difficult for some families to afford camp, especially if they have more than one child who wants to attend. There are certainly many other ways they could use that money, particularly if employment has been lost or is at risk. Also, camps may struggle to keep up with capital improvements when donations dip during an economic downturn. These challenges exist in an environment where many critical products and services, such as fuel and food, cost more to purchase.

In addition, families face plenty of competing options when deciding whether to send their kids to camp—specialty camps like drama, music, and sports camp, or mission trips through church or other organizations, to name just a few. And parents are often more inclined to let their kids choose what they want to do, in contrast to previous generations when parents were more prone to make those decisions for their children.

A final challenge is the myths that persist about camping. Parents who did not grow up attending camp may assume that all camp settings are rustic, and that their kids will spend the week sleeping on platforms in tents. Other misconceptions are that camps lack running water and electricity, or that camp food is limited to hot dogs roasted over an open fire. Some families may be concerned about how much supervision their children will have and how safe the camp environment is.

The solution to each of these challenges is communication and partnerships. "The only way camps will succeed is through partnerships—with churches, with community groups, with clusters of churches," says Joel Rude, associate director of Alpine Camp and Conference Center and president of the Association of Covenant Camps and Conference Centers.

Those partnerships may take various shapes. Many Covenant churches are strongly connected to the nearest Covenant camp and sponsor several fundraising events throughout the year to help send their kids to camp.

Cornerstone Covenant Church in Palm Desert, California, hosts a thrift store whose sole purpose is to raise funds to send disadvantaged children to camp. Alpine Camp and Conference Center partners with inner-city ministries. And Covenant Heights Camp and Retreat Center in Estes Park, Colorado, partners with public schools along the front range of the Rockies, from Fort Collins to Colorado Springs, to teach hands-on science curriculum. "Many of these schools use this as the curriculum for their science classes—map and compass, forest ecology, water ecology, animal tracks and trails, and geology," says John Amschler, director of outdoor education and programming at the camp. Some three thousand students come through the program each year, and the program is growing as five new schools have signed on this year. The successful collaboration offers a strong financial resource for the camp itself, Amschler explains. "It makes it possible for us to offer more scholarships for kids to attend camp during the summer."

For more than twenty years Covenant Point Bible Camp in Iron River, Michigan, has hosted Purdue University's Forestry and Natural Resources outdoor education program. For five weeks Covenant Point staff host Purdue students and professors, who travel from their campus nearly 500 miles away to gain hands-on experience in wildlife, fisheries, and forestry classes.

Of course, Rude continues, "All camps partner with their donors. We have a strategic partnership with the denomination. And most important, through prayer, we are always partnering with God to further our mission." ■

Gregg Hunter is president and CEO of the Christian Camp and Conference Association.

says, but either way, “he or she may be feeling disconnected from parents.”

Kids have the chance to ask difficult questions at camp, such as “Is God real? Is God there for me? This is a mess, and God just doesn’t seem to be evident,” Rude explains.

Often those difficult questions arise in the context of a cabin. The counselor may bring them to camp leaders, who may then address the issues during morning worship the next day. Again, camp becomes a reflection of the church, offering kids various pathways to connect with God—individual time for prayer, the small group experience of a cabin, and chapel time for corporate worship.

“Campers will quite often go, ‘I met God there. God met me, and I finally had an encounter with him that made sense and was real,’” Rude says.

While questions about faith and God serve as useful spiritual development examples, everything a camper has been taught—or not—about faith is put to the test at camp. Rude explains, “In a cabin, when the kids are living with each other, eating together, playing together, sweating together, trying to sleep in the same space, fights break out, the arguments happen, the jealousies occur, stuff gets misplaced and accusations fly, and the wise counselor or the wise camp leadership will go, ‘OK, this is our reality right now. Let’s see what the

Leadership development and training are often built into the camping experience, so campers can’t help but be exposed to it at some level....



Covenant Cedars, Nebraska

Bible says about how we’re supposed to work through this.’”

Often campers meet other kids from all over the country, outside of their day-to-day context and they learn about God through their conversations, through the experiences they share together, through nature, through participating in worship, and learning from the staff and developing relationships with them. “Those are all things that really enhance the camp experience,” Rude says.

Developing Leaders

Young people also learn leadership at camp. A well-run program allows a camper of any age to influence his or her cabin—by helping the group determine what to do with their free time, for example. Well-trained staff recognize kids with leadership potential and offer constructive responsibility to kids who may be acting out. “Often wild-card campers become great counselors,” says Rude. In fact, many campers eventually become counselors, who become leaders in a variety of venues as adults.

One program that directly targets emerging leaders is Adventures in Leadership (AIL) in the Northwest Conference. AIL targets two dozen high-school students each year who are recommended by their churches as potential leaders. The purpose of this leadership camp is to “provide student leaders with a biblical foundation and leadership framework that challenge and enable them to discover an effective lifestyle of Christian leadership, unique to their own abilities and giftedness,” according to the conference website. Those selected take a one-week trip to Adventurous Christians in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota.

“There is training, there is education, there is discussion about what it means to be a leader,” Stromberg says. “And even getting kids to own



Covenant Heights, Colorado



Covenant Harbor, Wisconsin



Covenant Point, Michigan



Portage Lake Camp, Michigan

the responsibility that God has given them and that in fact other kids follow them. They are a leader, not whether they call themselves a leader but because other people call them leader. And because of that, what is their responsibility before God to use their leadership, their influence, skills and abilities to use these for good rather than for ill?"

Students participate in teamwork activities and also activities where individual students take the lead. Ultimately, AIL helps young leaders gain the encouragement and training they need for the future. In a sense, it's a partnership between the church and the camp, where unique leadership training and development takes place.

Stromberg says the impact of AIL since it began in 1991 has been incredible.

"We received a letter from someone who went through ten years ago just saying, 'I just have to tell you that this was life changing,'" he says. "We've gotten letters from parents telling us they were floored by the influence AIL had on their son or daughter, that they were really a changed person, and the parents could see it in their attitude, in their thankfulness, in their taking responsibility."

Leadership development and training are often built into the camping experience, so campers can't help but be exposed to it at some level, says Dan Buhr, executive director at Covenant Cedars Bible Camp in Hordville, Nebraska.

"From the first time a child goes to camp, he or she is encouraged to explore leadership as opportunities to live independently and make choices often for the first time," he says.

"Many campers proceed along the leader development pathway at camp beginning as junior campers to youth campers to work crew to counselor in training to counselor to program staff with some ending up on full-time staff."

The Pacific Southwest Conference offers a distinctive leadership development program with far-reaching effects. As Christ's church welcomes and represents people of all ethnicities, backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses, the conference asked camps

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Bluewater Camp, Minnesota

The Covenant Camps

There are twenty-one Covenant camps in the United States and Canada. The following list is organized by conference.

CANADA

Covenant Bay Bible Camp, Westeros, Alberta

Covenant Heights Bible Camp, Onanole, Manitoba

Kootenay Covenant Bible Camp, Riondel, British Columbia

CENTRAL

Covenant Harbor Bible Camp and Retreat Center, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin

Covenant Point Bible Camp, Iron River, Michigan

EAST COAST

Pilgrim Pines Conference Center, West Swanzey, New Hampshire

GREAT LAKES

Portage Lake Covenant Bible Camp, Onekama, Michigan

Mission Meadows Bible Camp, Dewittville, New York

Covenant Mountain Mission Bible Camp, Jonesville, Virginia

MIDWEST

Covenant Cedars Bible Camp, Hordville, Nebraska

Covenant Heights Conference Center, Estes Park, Colorado

Twin Lakes Christian Center, Manson, Iowa

NORTH PACIFIC

Cascades Camp and Conference Center, Yelm, Washington

NORTHWEST

Adventurous Christians/Covenant Wilderness Center, Grand Marais, Minnesota

Bluewater Covenant Bible Camp, Grand Rapids, Minnesota

Covenant Park Bible Camp, Mahtowa, Minnesota

Covenant Pines Bible Camp, McGregor, Minnesota

Lake Beauty Covenant Bible Camp, Long Prairie, Minnesota

PACIFIC SOUTHWEST

Alpine Camp and Conference Center, Blue Jay, California

Mission Springs Christian Camp and Conference Center, Scotts Valley, California

ALASKA

Covenant Bible Camp, Unalakleet, Alaska

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how they could develop and promote that idea. After a year of praying and planning, Alpine Camp launched Camp Mosaic, designed as a leadership development weekend for young people between eighteen and twenty-five years old. The goal is to help them identify, develop, and deploy their spiritual gifts in service to the church.

Camp Mosaic is promoted throughout churches, urging them to send their young people with leadership potential. The goal is to send participants back to their local churches better equipped for ministry leadership in their particular setting. “Our goal is to have them interact with people of other social status, of other ethnicity and come together and form some good bonds together,” Gehring says.

Since it began three years ago, some 300 young people have participated.

Whether it’s through leadership development camps in northern Minnesota, Michigan, California, or any other state across the country, one of the primary objectives of camp leaders is to help train and assist the future generation of leaders in the church—for the express purpose of returning to their local church with the newfound knowledge and skills.

Camps partner with the local church to help with aspects of spiritual and leadership development. “There can be some pivotal spiritual markers or things that take place at camp that aren’t going to take place anywhere else,” Stromberg says. “If I go around and ask, ‘How many of you committed your life to Christ at a camp or made significant spiritual decisions in your faith walk at camp?’ it’s amazing the percentage of people that raise their hands.”

In the end, camps prepare leaders and individual Christians to live out, preach, and demonstrate the gospel on a daily basis to a hurting and needy world. ■