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A Spiritual Youth Camp as Expression of Church Missional Ecclesiology

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Abstract: This report emphasizes that the purpose and functions of the church are open to degrees of speculation and this speculation is further broadened when one reflects on a meaningful missional nature and vocation for the church. As such, I have reflected upon my own missional ecclesiology and concluded that a domain worthy of focus centers on residential youth camping experiences. I see these experiences as providing unique environments for spiritual growth. This report will offer illustration of such a camp that I have participated with. My thesis statement stresses that a spiritual youth camp can serve as an expression of church missional ecclesiology. My participation has allowed me to observe relevant camp dynamics that help to frame the aforementioned experience.

Keywords: youth camp, expression, church, experience, journey.

I. Introduction:

The purpose and functions of the church are open to degrees of speculation and this speculation is further broadened when one reflects on a meaningful missional nature and vocation for the church^[1]. In doing so I have reflected upon my own missional ecclesiology and concluded that a domain worthy of focus centers on residential youth camping experiences. I see such experiences as providing unique environments for spiritual growth. This report will offer illustration of such a camp that I have participated with. My thesis statement purports that a spiritual youth camp can serve as an expression of church missional ecclesiology.

My participation has allowed me to observe relevant camp dynamics that help to frame the experience. These first-hand observations have enhanced my understanding. In preparing this report I have sought to review sources from different time periods to better understand how the concept of residential youth camps has evolved. As such I have recognized the camp experience as a relevant social science phenomenon. “The Christian summer camp experience makes multiple measurable impacts on campers and camping ministry deserves attention from academic scholars.”^[2]

II. Historical Background and Context

Origin and Development

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The spiritual youth camp I am focusing on has met one week each summer since it was founded in 1955. The camp began as an outreach ministry of the Gahanna Community Church in 1955 as an idea of Reverend John Selvey who was minister at the Gahanna Community Church. The camp is modeled after programming at Camp Akita which is owned by First Community Church (Marble Cliff, Ohio). Camp Akita was developed by Reverend Roy Burkhart (First Community Church). Reverend Selvey had served on the Camp Akita staff and was inspired into ministry by Reverend Burkhart. I grew up in the Gahanna Community Church which had been the Gahanna Methodist Church before disaffiliating.

Interdenominational Nature

It is an interdenominational camp that meets at Tar Hollow State Park in southern Ohio. Campers come from all over Ohio and surrounding states. I have attended each summer since 1966 so this has allowed me to grow my missional ecclesiology in a manner that has been commensurate with the missional nature and vocation of the church as manifested in the church camp. An overall objective of the camp is to provide a setting for the camper (ages are 6th grade thru high school graduate) to have a spiritual experience that can serve as a means for greater self-awareness and appreciation for their self potential. The camp session generally includes about 180 campers and 70-80 staff (counselors, cooks, & support staff).

Camp Dynamics

No religious denomination is promoted and the religious backgrounds of camp participants (campers & staff) is varied. Visiting clergy have included religious leaders from a variety of faiths such as Jewish, Catholic, Congregational, Community, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and others^[3]. The camp is commonly described as being spiritual but not denominational. The camp directors/founders describe this phenomenon as "we want Catholics to go home better Catholics, Presbyterians to go home better Presbyterians, non-Christians to go home better non-Christians, etc.".

III. Camp Structure and Activities

Daily Routin

A goal at the camp is to break down barriers to self-expression. Since campers are ages 10-18, peer pressure influences are particularly strong and these peer pressures can greatly inhibit self-expression. Thus, steps are taken to create an environment that rewards genuine sharing and discredits typical peer pressures (i.e. judging others by their clothes, physical appearance, language usage and racial/ethnic background). Campers typically come to the camp with a set of peer pressure oriented norms that staff seek to dilute. The result is usually a normative vacuum that allows more spiritually oriented value norms to evolve.^[4] "Taking a child—or yourself—out of a daily routine and allowing them to experience nature and worship in new and different ways helps them to be open to spiritual ideas and formation."^[5]

The means to this end is a collection of activities that consistently celebrate the worth of each individual. Such activities include songs that everyone can sing, periodic use of a "rule of silence" for time to reflect, daily small discussion groups, at least three spiritual services a day (a morning watch, afternoon chapel, and evening vespers), a Thursday night baptism service, a Friday night awards ceremony, the informal evolution of nicknames, emphasis on cabin units (all campers live in a cabin with at least one counselor) and classes (hiking, swimming, sports, etc.).

Religious Emphasis

Though the camp is inter-denominational it is strongly rooted in religion. No one denominational perspective is stressed and religious services are generally not led by sanctioned clergy. Spiritual faith is emphasized throughout a typical camp day. Campers participate in a "morning watch" each morning before breakfast. A rule of silence (no talking) is observed during the morning watch. The morning watch offers a 10-15 minute period of quiet reflection guided by a one page handout with thoughts for the day and recognition of the camp theme. "A growing body of recent scholarship identifies Christian summer camps as significant settings for spiritual growth."^[6]

Social Norms and Peer Pressure

After morning watch, breakfast is preceded by a prayer that is typically offered by a volunteer camper. Mid-morning activities include an hour-long discussion group period that will generally include discussion/reflection regarding spiritual faith. Lunch is preceded with a prayer much like the breakfast prayer. Mid-afternoon activities include a 30 minute "chapel" service that usually includes a couple of camp songs, readings (poems, prose, and thoughts) by campers, a main speaker, and a closing prayer. Dinner is preceded with a prayer. There is an early evening vespers, much like the afternoon chapel, that usually includes camp songs, readings, a main speaker, a performance by the camp choir, and a closing prayer.

Camp Community and Identity

A final worship service may occur during the course of the evening depending on the scheduled evening activities. At a minimum, the camp day will close with a "friendship circle" where all campers and staff will form a large circle, sing some camp songs, listen to some closing thoughts from the camp directors, and have a closing prayer. When campers return to their cabins for the night some cabin counselors will lead faith-centered discussions or, at times, Bible readings^[7].

Evening program worship services include the following. Sunday night features a "Never Walk Alone" service in which first-year campers and counselors are escorted, one at a time by veteran campers, to a large camp fire. The rule of silence is observed and, after a speaker, the camp community sings "You Never Walk Alone". The Thursday night program has two religious services at the lake: 1) a baptism (by immersion in the lake) service and 2) a late evening vesper service. The final night (Friday) culminates with a communion service, usually held outside, that closes the evening. The rule of silence that is observed during the communion service continues to be observed throughout the night until Saturday morning.

IV. Camp Community and Identity

Unity and Diversity

Singing is a unique part of the camp experience. The simple act of singing together perpetuates a singular collective camp spirit. A unified voice is realized. This type of bonding has been described in other camp settings. "The heart of LSU (Lutheran Summer Music) was making music and living in community. . . .The spiritual dimension of community played a large part in this formation."^[8]

The camp can't teach doctrine because there are too many denominations represented amongst the camp community. A general goal is that we are striving to help all participants be better people and to respect each other. As stated earlier, we "want Catholics to go home better Catholics, Presbyterians to go home better Presbyterians, non-Christians to go home better non-Christians, etc.". In past years over 40 churches have been represented at the camp but this number dropped off due to declining church attendance in the U.S.

Inclusivity and Acceptance

Campers and staff come from a wide range of backgrounds and, even with all the diversity, participants come looking for "safe-haven" from the negative pressures of school, family and trying to understand themselves. Campers share their feelings and consistently console one another in a manner that creates an almost surreal camp-wide comfort zone. Dedication to the group and respect for the individual is consistently stressed. Thus, although there are conflicts during the course of the week, the camp is frequently referred to as "heaven on earth", "the way things ought to be" and "my favorite week of the year where I can get away from the world". A camper from another camp summed it up with "Camp is a way to get away from our troubles. But this break from reality can't last forever."^[9]

V. Impact and Evaluation

Spiritual Growth

A unique confirmation of camp identities occurs with the Friday night Awards Ceremony. On Friday afternoon camp staff deliberate and vote on recipients for the Camper of the Year, Theme Awards (male and female), Most Improved Campers (male and female) and Rookie of the Year (male and female). Campers vote on the Counselor of the Year Award while staff are deliberating.^[10] The staff selects campers who receive a wide range of other awards that acknowledge camper behavior during the week. The Awards Ceremony is a very supportive environment with applause and vocal support offered to all award recipients. Not all staff agree with the giving of awards. I do not participate with award deliberations but most staff support the custom.

There are a variety of camp activities that indirectly and directly encourage campers to be less concerned with social norms and inhibitions. There are many silly/childish songs that campers and staff sing throughout the week. Often times new campers are hesitant to engage in such singing because it is childish. But when they see staff and older campers participating, most new campers will begin enthusiastic participation within a day. Campers are humorously "forced" to sing or dance at meal time.^[11] Such "performances" are wildly applauded. Thus, inhibiting society norms are dismantled and new, less restrictive, norms are promoted.

Campers, rather than staff, typically serve as speakers at religious services throughout the week. Speakers will often share revealing thoughts they have about themselves and their lives. They receive unconditional support from the camp. This phenomena breeds more and more self-disclosure from speakers throughout the week.^[12] The realization that individuals can share their weaknesses, insecurities, dreams and aspirations, and not be ridiculed, has a very positive effect^[13]. That they will receive support from the group is almost intoxicating. "Camp is messy. . . .It is about providing space for relational encounters and interactive play. . . .The purpose of the activity is the process itself. Theologically, this is known as discipleship."^[14]

It is within this stress on campers speaking at religious services that the missional nature and vocation of the church, via the camp, is accentuated. That is, the focus on campers results in campers taking ownership of their faith development. This has been a part of the evolution of my own missional ecclesiology starting from my youth and continuing into adulthood. This has benefitted my guiding of campers in that I have experienced the camp phenomenon from the perspective of a camper. "Christian camps locate this powerfully tactile experience in the context of Christian faith teachings and practices. . . .opportunities for young people to reimagine life itself as caught up with and dependent upon God and to rethink the nature of sanctuary."^[15]

Many of the camp activities are a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves. There are a variety of sports classes and outdoor activities (i.e. swimming, fishing & hiking). The goal is not to produce greater athletes or catch big fish, rather it is to provide a climate that promotes fellowship among campers. Each cabin creates a stunt (skit) for Stunt Night. The goal is not to develop acting skills, it is to promote cabin unity and stronger interpersonal relationships. Songs are sung in many of the camp settings throughout a typical camp day. The goal is not to produce excellent singing voices, it is to produce a unified chorus of the collective camp mind. "Camp is a setting where non-routine experiences have the possibility of capturing the imagination; leading a young person to greater openness to the Holy Spirit."^[16]

The camp improves the sense of self and sense of others. The camp since its inception has consistently stressed interaction among diverse groups in American society. Diversity exists among campers and staff in areas such as racial & ethnic composition, economic classes, religious background, staff occupations and residential locations (i.e. urban, suburban, & rural). The camp leadership actively sought to integrate the camp (racially & ethnically) in the early 1960's by establishing relations with churches that have populations different than the home church.^[17] The first black person and Jewish person I met, as an example, was at camp at age ten.

There is considerable economic diversity among the campers and staff. The camp draws from the very poor and affluent of American society. Campers do not spend money at camp, they are discouraged from bringing money, so money is not an influential factor during the course of the week. The staff works to downplay economic differences among campers. Regarding religious backgrounds, camp participants have included people from a wide variety of religious backgrounds, including atheists. Clergy from varying denominations have come to camp for the week or shorter visits as schedules permit^[18].

Occupational diversity exists among the staff without presenting any obstacles to staff interaction and effectiveness. The staff is comprised of individuals from a wide range of occupational backgrounds (i.e. blue collar, white collar, unemployed, etc.) but manages to work well together during the camp session because the common occupation for the week is "camp counselor". The camp has evolved into an event for all ages, although it is specifically geared for campers fifth grade thru 12th grade.

As staff members marry (in some cases to other staff members) and have children, they continue to come to camp and help in other ways rather than as camp counselors (i.e. help in the kitchen, with classes, or special program events). Since their children under age ten are not old enough to be part of the standard camping program, these kids frequently live with their parents in campers, empty cabins or tents.^[19] Most live in campers, and the campers are located in the parking lot, so they are referred to as "parking lot kids" (PLK's). These younger children serve to make the camp session more of a "community" rather than a program-based camping experience.

Camp is frequently described as being "special"^[20]. I interpret the "specialness" as being linked to the camp environment that allows for interaction relatively free of societal inhibitions.

This allows for the spiritual sense of self to evidence itself and individuals will interact with one another in a uniquely genuine manner. The collective mind of the group is strong.

Since the camp has become more independent it does not draw campers from any one particular church so much anymore and advertising is very limited.^[21] A vast majority of new campers (and staff) learn about it by word-of-mouth. News of positive experiences of participants spreads through family networks and neighborhoods. At meal times, I frequently ask campers how they heard about camp and most say they got connected with camp via a neighbor, friend, church, or

family member. I can only remember one camper who responded "I saw the advertisement in the local newspaper." There have been years when camp was full and kids were turned away.

VI. Conclusion

Summary and Reflection

Camp provides a unique environment for growth of the individual via growth of the group^[22]. Measuring the effects of this growth is very difficult because, while some changes are immediate within an individual, other changes will not occur until much later. Spiritual seeds can be planted at camp that do not come to fruition until long after the camper has left camp. Understanding the constructs of such a spiritual experience is the first step toward measurement. This report is intended as a contribution to that preliminary understanding and, as such, it is a statement of the missional ecclesiology that I desire to pursue and this missional ecclesiology is nested within the missional nature and vocation of the church as manifested in the camp.

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