

How Outdoor Ministries Serve the Church

Outdoor ministries provide "A Place Apart."

In the rhythm of Christian life, outdoor ministries serve as a place apart. That is a universal strength of outdoor ministries. *There is* a rhythm to Christian life - modeled for us by Jesus. We are called to be out and about in the world - serving and witnessing - but then, as Jesus sought the quiet place, we must also seek "the place apart," to refresh and renew and draw strength from Christian community. Outdoor ministries offer the opportunity to get away from daily routine - and the computer, the cell phone, the television - and, as Jesus did, pray to God, listen to God and be guided by God. Whether through summer camp programs or adult retreats or youth retreats, getting away from the familiar helps us to become more "tuned in" to the presence of God.

Outdoor Ministries offer the opportunity to be deeply in touch with God's creation.

Simply being outdoors is part of our spiritual, mental, emotional and physical well-being. In this electronic era, screens and gadgets of every kind steal our time. Outdoor activities in the woods - in the "wilderness" - amplify our time! Watching a sunrise or a sunset, worshipping at campfires, being out under the stars, going for hikes, "creek stomping," learning about plants and animals, cooking outdoors, and sleeping on or near the ground, all enhance our experience of God and underscore the first article of the creed. All of us - adults and youth - need to be outdoors.

A week at camp has a powerful influence in the faith formation of youth.

The American Camping Association is the primary accreditation agency for camps of every kind and most ELCA camps are accredited through the ACA. A recent ACA study showed that religious camps (not just Lutheran and not just Christian) were more successful than any other kind of camp (including sports, music, academic, etc.) in achieving their goals - primarily, growth in faith.

How does this happen?

The power of outdoor ministries is the camp counselor. No, they are (generally) not theologically trained. Yes, they are still maturing in their own faith. But they are people of faith and they are ready and willing to articulate their faith to youth.

College-age camp counselors are automatically ascribed the status of "cool" by campers - generally, more "cool" than parents and pastors and Sunday school teachers can ever be. Instant (and unearned) admiration is both a great honor and a great responsibility, but, in the context of passing on the faith, it is simply a powerful dynamic. If a cool, college-age person thinks that it is OK to have faith and talk about their faith, then that gives campers "permission" to also have faith and share their faith - permission to pray - even out loud! If in no other way, the summer camp community encourages youth to "claim" their faith simply through contact with other youth from other places who are also growing in their faith. Camp is a safe place to explore and talk about one's faith.

Outdoor Ministries nurture Church leadership.

Outdoor ministries nurture church leadership at every level. Throughout a camp day, campers (and counselors) have the opportunity to practice their faith and express their faith in many ways. Parents report that the camp experience gave their children higher self-esteem and more confidence in their abilities. Many parents say that their children come home from camp more willing to participate in church activities and more willing to take on leadership roles in the church. Youth who attend camp are more likely to continue their relationship with the church beyond confirmation.

A study by Luther Seminary showed that more than 80% of those entering seminary pointed to camping ministry as formative in their call to professional ministry. Most of that 80% served as camp counselors. Camp counselors who do not go on to professional ministry tend to become life-long leaders in their congregations - particularly with respect to Christian education.

Outdoor Ministries programs offer perfect opportunities for evangelism.

Inviting a friend to camp is about as "non-threatening" as evangelism gets - non-threatening on the part of the one who does the inviting and, for the one who is invited, a non-threatening introduction to the Church. While it is unfortunate to say it that way - "non-threatening" - it is simply the truth. It is not easy for us or our youth to invite a friend to church and Sunday school. (If it were we would probably do it more often.) It is easy to invite a friend to camp - and unchurched youth respond to the experience of camp in the same positive ways that youth do who are already members of a congregation.

Most outdoor ministries offer "Day Camp" - a program similar to Vacation Bible School that takes place in the congregation, but uses camp curriculum and is facilitated by camp staff. Whether a congregation does its own Vacation Bible School or contracts with an outdoor ministry for a Day Camp, the time is ripe for evangelism. It is the moment to be very intentional about inviting the unchurched youth in the community to take part. A recent article in the New York Times was about the Southern Baptist experience of evangelism through Vacation Bible School. It stated that "Vacation Bible School is the single most effective tool of evangelism and the impetus for 26% of all baptisms in 2006."

Camping ministry is a tool in the hands of the body of Christ.

- Participation in an outdoor ministry enhances the life and ministries of the congregation.
- Lutheran Outdoor Ministries is one of the best assets we have for passing on the faith and growing the church.