

Working



Under Cover

How denominational camps are meeting today's ministry challenges

by Alison Phillips

In the face of a constantly changing society, one thing remains steady for many denominations: the value of Christian camping.

Camps across the country value their supportive denominations and the multiple benefits of affiliation. They're also realistic about the challenges of the turbulent economy and changing church—and ready to creatively tackle them to maintain effective ministries.

Spreading the Word

In some ways, camp leaders say, running a denominational camp is very

similar to operating any other outdoor ministry. Many market to the community at large, in addition to affiliated churches, to attract guest groups and campers. And for some, this is a necessary priority.

“Monies to pay for programs have been cut on the state level because of a decline in its churches’ giving, which has translated to cancellation of events at our facility,” says Don Sawyer, director of Lake Yale Baptist Conference Center in Leesburg,

Fla. “Lake Yale has had to adjust by marketing more to other denominational and not-for-profit groups to keep income coming into the center.”

Smaller guest numbers have also forced several Seventh-day Adventist Church camps to scale back, cutting down on summer and year-round staff and recreational equipment, says Bill Wood, the denomination’s coordinator for camp ministries.

“It is very challenging with the current economic climate to offer all that guests have come to expect from our center at a reasonable price that they can afford,” Sawyer says.

The Lake Yale staff's strategy to meet this challenge is old-fashioned hospitality, which results in valuable word-of-mouth marketing.

"We have to offer the best possible experience with our facility," Sawyer says. "I truly believe it comes from a staff that is willing to go the extra mile for our guests. Even though we do not have the newest hotel rooms or camp dorms and the most high tech meeting spaces, we have a lot of repeat business because they truly love the hospitality they receive from our staff."

Jumonville, a United Methodist camp that focuses more on marketing to the Christian community at large than to denominational churches, has discovered a creative way to reach potential guests: sponsor Christian concerts.

"This past spring we were a sponsor for Building 429, Third Day and Skillet," says Larry Beatty, president of the Hopwood, Pa., camp and retreat center. "Several of these concerts were held at a large church that was not a part of our denomination. We have since had that same large church begin to use retreat facilities."

In addition, Jumonville reaches out to denominational churches with visits, and staff members call and e-mail past retreat groups and campers to encourage them to return.

Denominations support their camps with marketing tools, too. A Seventh-day Adventist brochure, for example, features a map illustrating the locations of the church's camps and expounds on the value of the outdoor ministry experience. And the Evangelical Covenant Church's denominational, regional and local church's print and online publications often feature camping's benefits.

"Each regional conference does a great job," says Ray Warren, executive director of Covenant Harbor Bible Camp & Retreat Center, an Evangelical Covenant Church camp in Lake Geneva, Wis. "There's never a problem in getting our camps promoted through the church."

Finding Funds

While strong marketing strategies bring in campers and funds, getting outside donations can be difficult. Guests who are not part of the denomination often perceive that the churches provide adequate support.

This is not always the case. Covenant Harbor, for example, is owned and operated by a local conference of the church but is not directly funded.

On the other hand, the advantage of the church connection is that many churches' members are camp donors.

"You're part of a bigger family; you have a long history of loyalty among church members," says Warren, who previously spent 10 years directing a nondenominational camp. "Most of our individual donors are members of the denomination."

To help keep these donors connected, the camp holds a worship service every Sunday during summer camp season, drawing people from all over the Chicago area. Warren estimates that about 85 percent are part of a denominational church; others are local community members or relatives of staff and campers.

In addition, the denomination's estate planning program invites people to consider giving to the church's camps.

Covenant Harbor also gives local Evangelical Covenant Churches promotional packets. Many churches respond by doing fund-raisers for camper scholarships, and some invite the camp's leaders to speak to promote the experience.

One Chicago church leader said, "We will do whatever it takes to get our children to camp, and money should not be an issue."

Strengthening Support

But even if the denomination backs the camps 100 percent, each individual church is not always as supportive. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for example, some local pastors aren't particularly interested in sending the church's youth to camp, and some churches feel that they should get to use a camp for free.

The denomination hopes to produce a how-to manual for churches' use of camps, based on the results of a major research project it's doing to illustrate camping's impact, Wood says.

The Evangelical Covenant Church also seeks to help its congregations see the power of camp ministry.

"It is important to continually build bridges to denominational leaders and local churches, especially the church plants," says Bruce Lawson, staff associate of camping for the Evangelical Covenant Church. "It seems that many of our church planters do not have the same camp experience that pastors from an earlier generation had, and so helping them catch the vision is critical."

Denominational churches and pastors today also tend to be less loyal to the denomination than others were in the past.

"[Churches and pastors] go to what is familiar or seems to meet their needs more effectively," Lawson says. "Our camps have a responsibility to help these churches and pastors realize that their denomination provides a wonderful ministry tool in its camps for them to use. Getting these people to visit the camp is often an important first step to a long-lasting relationship."

A camp association within the

On the Internet

▶ Adventist Association of Camp Professionals www.adventistcamps.org

▶ Association of Covenant Camps & Conference Centers www.covenantcamps.org

▶ Sound Word's CCCA audio recordings, "Assessing the Economic Engine of Your Ministry" (5 CD set), "The Forgotten Theology of Retreat," "Living with Your Board" and "What's up with Denominations?" www.soundword.com

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denomination is also helpful in gaining important church support.

"The Association of Covenant Camps and Conference Centers has

played a critical role in keeping the ministry of camping visible within the denomination and working with denominational leaders to demonstrate

support for the vision of the denomination," Lawson says.

Camp professionals say they more often take cues about their day-to-day operations from their customers—denominational or not—rather than directly from denominational leaders, who are often more hands-off.

"I view our campers, camp parents, retreat leaders and retreat participants to be our 'bosses,'" Beatty says of Jumonville. "We pay a lot of attention to our evaluation forms. If we are not meeting both their real and perceived needs, someone else will, and we will lose their loyalty."

For Beatty, constantly listening to guests is key to understanding the constituents' changing needs.

"One of my favorite things to do is to work the registration line during summer camp," he says. "Talking to the parents and campers as they wait in line for registration is very insightful and provides a personal touch that most parents don't expect."

Still, positive communication with denominational leaders is critical for the camps' success.

"The [Association of Covenant Camps and Conference Centers] board has always been welcomed by denominational leaders," Lawson says. "We always approach them to listen and not ask for anything. The past president of the Covenant said that we were the only group to visit his office without a list of demands or needs."

Lawson recommends the same strategy for camps or conference centers of any denominational affiliation.

"Do not get isolated," he says. "Get out there and help your churches and denominational leaders remember that you are on the same team." ■

Success by Support

A supportive denomination is key to ministry success, say leaders of denominationally affiliated camps. Below are several ways church groups support their outdoor ministries:

▶ **Marketing:** Some denominations' national headquarters and/or regional church groups provide brochures and other materials that promote the value of camping and the locations of their camps. Individual congregations also help spread the word about local camps.

▶ **Vision:** Denominational leaders are vocal about the power of outdoor ministry, championing its role in deepening spiritual growth, strengthening churches and bolstering relationships. Some denominations have a national staff member who acts as a liaison between the camps and the church.

"Our camps provide the glue that holds churches together in the denomination," says Bruce Lawson,

staff associate, camping for the Evangelical Covenant Church. "Within our growing denomination, camps are working to resource new churches through offering ministry opportunities as well as providing a valuable connection to their new denominational family."

▶ **Fund raising:** Church members often faithfully support their denominational camps, and some congregations give regularly to the ministries.

▶ **Guest groups:** Camps host denominational events as well as groups and families from local churches.

▶ **Staff:** The denomination is a pool for summer and year-round staff members.

▶ **Networking:** Camps within denominations appreciate working with and helping other affiliated outdoor ministries. Some denominations also have camp membership associations that further facilitate interaction.

▶ **Education:** The Evangelical Covenant Church devotes an entire seminar track to camping at its annual national conference. And the Seventh-day Adventist Church has a mentoring program to help new, inexperienced directors.

▶ **Research:** The Seventh-day Adventist Church is so invested in camping as a powerful ministry medium that leaders are conducting research about its impact. The denomination's coordinator for camp ministries, Bill Wood, says the study is tracking the values that campers learn, the number of campers who make decisions to follow Christ and join the church, and the contributions former campers and staff are making to the church.

"We're finding that 60 percent of summer staff are making career [ministry] decisions because of what they learned working at camp," Wood says.

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