

CHURCHES AND CAMPS IN PARTNERSHIP

How camps and churches can serve each other





Photo courtesy of Word of Life Fellowship

“Some churches see camps as a parachurch organization that suck life out of the church, but I believe it’s just the opposite: They pour life into the church.” ▶

That quote is from Tom Rhulman, pastor at Shoreline Baptist Church (Shoreline, Washington) and board member of Camp Gilead (Carnation, Washington). Rhulman knows firsthand that summer camp experiences positively impact the church. He has been part of Christian camping since he was two weeks old, when his father, a pastor, took him to his first week of summer camp. His church is one of 25 in Washington that have partnered with Camp Gilead, and he has seen the benefits of that partnership. However, he worries that many churches aren't seeing the advantages of partnering with a camp and supporting what they do.

Benefits to Churches

Camp is a powerful experience for those who attend. From meeting Jesus for the first time to deepening their spiritual lives, campers return from a week at summer camp changed. When churches take their youth to camp, they provide an opportunity for what Randy Rainwater, lead pastor of Grace New Hope Church (Lawrenceville, Georgia), calls "epic moments — moments that impact every other moment of your life." Camp provides the time away, a lack of distractions and dedicated space to focus spiritually that's hard to come by at home. "Jesus took His guys to camp a lot. It's all over the New Testament. He would take the disciples away to focus on His teachings," says Rainwater. "It's important to have that time away."

According to Rainwater, being immersed in God's Word for a week and listening to a different speaker than they hear every Sunday at church benefits the campers. "It is hugely formative for our kids to hear someone else speaking into their lives. It is so powerful."

Besides helping church kids grow spiritually stronger, camps support what churches do in so many ways. "What we do in church is evangelism, fellowship, worship, discipling and leadership training," says Rhulman. "That is what happens at camp as well. What they are doing supports what we are doing."

Campers from his church will attend camp and bring non-believing friends along. Their friends will come back having met Jesus and continue their discipleship in the church's youth group. What happens at summer camp is a part of growing the church. With fewer and fewer kids attending church today and a diminishing culture of belief, camp can play a vital role to help a new generation meet Jesus and get plugged into a local church.

Youth returning from summer camp or a retreat are better prepared to be part of the church family when they return. Rhulman states, "For me to take 20 to 30 people to a family camp and eat meals and participate in activities and learn together is wonderful. We know each other a lot better after that week."

In addition, teenage and young-adult church members who work at camp are gaining skills that will help them in their future careers and benefit the local church. High school staff cleaning the camp or cooking and serving meals are learning valuable skills that they can bring back to the church family. In addition, college students serving as counselors are learning leadership, discipleship and mentoring skills, and how to relate to different types of people.

"It is a wonderful place for our kids [and young adults] to learn how to serve the Lord," Rhulman says. "Some churches, especially smaller congregations, don't have opportunities like this [for them] to serve."

Not only do camps provide service opportunities, but also they provide new experiences for those who attend. "Camps are set up to provide experiences we can't do at church," says Rainwater. Camps can provide all or part of the programming for the group, which "allows us to just be with our kids, and that is so important." Camps also do much of the administration for the week, allowing campers and church leaders to spend time having fun and growing deeper relationships. "Every minute I spend planning, I can't spend with a kid," says Rainwater.

It has been said that a week at camp can provide a year's worth of growth and connection back home. Camp compresses the experience campers and camp staff have spiritually in an environment conducive to accelerated growth. ▶

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Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon

“If churches get on board with camp — sending kids, supporting their work — it will turn your church around.” —Tom Rhulman, pastor at Shoreline Baptist Church (Shoreline, Washington)



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Benefits to Camps

While churches benefit from their youth attending camps, each camp also relies on the church to support its work.

Churches offer their greatest support by attending camp — either as a group or by encouraging kids to attend on their own. Rainwater notes, “We’ve been to places where we rent out a facility and lead everything, we’ve been to camps that lead everything, and we’ve gone to places where we do a little of both.” Each of these experiences brings something to the table for the youth group.

Of course, bringing a large guest group helps a camp financially, but camps also benefit from local churches connecting them to potential board members, staff and donors. The synergistic relationship allows camps and the local church to each do what God has equipped them to do well as they support one another.

“Just like camp supports the church with a great place for fellowship, evangelism, worship and everything else during the summer, it also provides a place for retreats the rest of the year,” says Rhulman. His church rents Camp Gilead for leadership retreats throughout the year and ensures they attend the various father/son weekends, fundraisers, work days and other activities that Camp Gilead hosts year-round.

Another opportunity for churches to come alongside camps is with financial donations. Rhulman notes that his church makes a monthly donation to Camp Gilead, while members will also choose to donate on their own.

Partnering with camps allows for the church to grow in different ways. “Camp time is special — it’s Kairos — time that’s set apart,” notes Rainwater. “It’s a place where you can see God at work.” While not taking the place of church, he feels it is “one of the key moments for kids.” Kids that come back from camp closer to God, which affects the health and growth of the church.

Rhulman agrees, noting that pastoral support for camp goes a long way in leading the church. “When a pastor gets on board,” he notes, “supporting, attending events, volunteering — the church members will follow.” While that support helps the camp continue its mission, he knows it also helps the church. “If churches get on board with camp — sending kids, supporting their work — it will turn your church around.” ■



Carrie L. Chandler is a freelance writer and also serves as program director at Camp New Dawn (Chickamauga, Georgia) each summer. Along with her writing and camp work, she home-schools her three children and helps her husband farm on the fourth-generation family farm where they live.



Photo courtesy of Camp Lebanon