



Rethinking the Classroom: The Logic of Camp in Educational Ministries

JACOB SORENSON

TAKING CAMP SERIOUSLY

The sky was dark and ominous over the expanse of Lake Tahoe, the mountains on the far shore barely visible through the haze. The rain had stopped, however, and there had been no lightening for a solid twenty minutes. It was now or never. Eight young confirmation students gathered along the shore with four high-school mentors, three adult volunteers, their two pastors, and me, a researcher who had joined them for part of their eight-day confirmation camp experience. We had played games together, swam, kayaked under the full moon, and had loads of fun, to be sure. But we also worshiped God, prayed together, and had interactive learning sessions about the Bible, the Wesley brothers, and the essentials of Methodist theology. It was a small group living together in an intimate space, and I felt welcomed into what was becoming a tight-knit, trusting community. A simple question had brought us to the lakeshore that stormy night. Three of the confirmation

Ministry leaders and scholars often have dismissed the camp experience as mere fun and games, while lifting up the traditional classroom model of direct instruction. This article challenges these long-standing assumptions using descriptions of ministry contexts and new data from a nationwide study of camp directors and congregational leaders. The six big ideas offer a compelling portrait of Christian summer camp, revealing its power for Christian education.

students had not been baptized, and one had asked a question akin to that of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36: *Here is Lake Tahoe, what is to prevent me from being baptized?* That young man felt more comfortable with a church community than he ever had before, and this place was special to him. Would the community leaders take his request and his plea seriously? His query led the other two unbaptized students to make similar requests, leading to a flurry of phone calls to family members who were not present. The stormy skies and the local youth group that met us on the beach added to the energy of the experience as we waded into the choppy waters. So it was that under a stormy sky, three shivering young Christians were immersed in the crystal-clear waters of Lake Tahoe and baptized in the name of the Triune God, as an eclectic gathering of the Christian community laid hands on them and proclaimed them each, “Child of God!” This incredibly tactile experience is embedded into my mind, and I am confident that it was even more significant for the young Christians who were baptized that day. Camp experiences such as this should be taken seriously as effective Christian education and discipleship programs.

Christian education takes many forms. Traditional education programs like confirmation training have tended to focus on covering a body of material without adequate regard for how young Christians are learning. Research from The Confirmation Project offers encouraging news that Christian education programs across the country are adopting a wide variety of teaching methods.¹ However, the findings also indicate that many ministry professionals continue to think of Christian education in terms of direct instruction, and young learners often enter with the same attitudes they bring to other classroom settings. It is difficult to break out of this mold when confirmation instruction takes the form of a class, no matter how many creative methods are brought into that structure. The Christian summer camp experience provides a unique model for Christian education and faith formation that offers valuable insights to educators in a variety of contexts.

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The Confirmation Project is the first major youth-ministry study to take seriously the role of the camp experience in Christian education and faith formation, and this article examines the data related to camping ministry. The attention on camp was precipitated in part by an analogous study on confirmation work

¹The Confirmation Project, directed by Richard Osmer and Katherine Douglass, is generously funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., and includes five denominations: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, and African Methodist Episcopal Church. The African Methodist Episcopal Church does not have a national camping ministry program, but the other four do. For more information see theconfirmationproject.com.

in Europe, which found that programs making extensive use of the camp form showed significantly higher results on measures of Christian education and faith formation.² In addition to robust survey research similar to the European study, this article draws from extensive site visits and in-depth interviews that allow us to wade into the waters of the camp experience.³ Using data from the site visits and two national surveys (one of camp directors and one of confirmation ministry leaders), this article presents six *big ideas* about Christian education in the camp form.

BIG IDEA 1: CAMP IS MORE THAN FUN AND GAMES

One of the reasons that camping ministry gets such little scholarly attention is that it is often dismissed as mere fun and games. Youth ministry has seen a tremendous increase over the past thirty years in scholarly literature, research, and educational programs, but camping ministry has been largely ignored, as if it is youth ministry's embarrassing younger sibling. Popular youth-ministry writers often downplay camp's role in faith formation or use camp experiences in contrast to more theologically sound models of ministry.⁴ Most writers are not overtly antagonistic toward camp (indeed, many are camp supporters), but the consistent use of stereotypes and negative anecdotes by trustworthy, veteran youth-ministry leaders gives the overall impression that camp is theologically shallow and little more than fun and games.

To be clear: camp is fun. At each of the camps I visited, we told jokes, played games, splashed each other in the pools, and laughed uproariously at things that frankly would not be that funny if I wrote them down here; you had to be there to get it. Fully 97 percent of the camper survey respondents agreed, "I had a lot of fun," and participants repeatedly described camp with words like "fun," "awesome," and "great," with occasional combinations like "awesomely great." Fun is one of the most recognizable aspects of camp, and it should not be overlooked as an essential part of the experience. Enjoyment is a key element in education, as it provides motivation to engage in the material and facilitates knowledge retention. However, reducing the value of camp to mere enjoyment in a quasi-church

²Friedrich Schweitzer, Wolfgang Ilg, and Henrik Simojoki, *Confirmation Work in Europe: Empirical Results, Experiences and Challenges: A Comparative Study in Seven Countries* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2010), 284. The confirmation camp program in Finland has gained particular attention from the scholarly community for its potential in facilitating greater church engagement and spiritual transformation. Jacob Sorenson, "Transforming the Spiritual Storehouse: A Portrait of Confirmation Camp in Finland," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 172–190.

³The chosen methodology of *portraiture* is particularly suited to the camp environment, where unique sounds, smells, and sights are essential to the experience. See Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

⁴See, for example, DeVries's caricature of the "camp counselor youth minister": Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn't Last and What Your Church Can Do About It* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008) 140; and Root's use of camp as a counterexample to youth ministry involving shared suffering: Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014) 197.

environment is an oversimplification of a very rich educational experience. Camp participants repeatedly connected their enjoyment with the new experiences they were having, the friends they were making, the challenges they overcame, and the opportunities to express their faith.

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“Fun” remains a benchmark that everyone agrees with, but Christian camp directors across the country rated five other items as more important than fun. These areas should be considered the top priorities of Christian camping ministry. The top six items in order of ranked importance are:

1. Participant safety
2. Fellowship and community building
3. Self-esteem and character building
4. Facilitating participants’ experiences of or encounters with God
5. Individual faith formation
6. Fun for all participants

It is no surprise that “safety” is number one on this list, given the tremendous responsibility that camps have in caring for other people’s children. The other items are instructive to those tempted to dismiss camp as glorified babysitting or nothing more than fun and games. Consider how all four of these priorities were present in the baptism experience in Lake Tahoe. Camps are places of *fellowship*, where people of different generations gather together and form intentional Christian community. They focus on *self-esteem and character*, with an emphasis on helping unique individuals recognize that they are beloved children of God and grow into their roles as vital members of the body of Christ. Camps are liminal spaces where participants have a heightened awareness that God is present and active in the world, and camps take *experiences of God* seriously. Camps are also places of *individual faith formation*, where programs are dedicated to nurturing Christian faith. These four priorities do not function independently but rather as part of a cohesive whole within a fun and safe environment.

BIG IDEA 2: CAMP LEADS TO GREATER ENGAGEMENT IN CONGREGATIONS

One of the key camp-related findings of The Confirmation Project is that the camp experience often leads to greater engagement in congregational ministries. This finding directly contradicts the anecdotal account that camp ruins kids for church by creating unrealistic expectations. Karen-Marie Yust notes that

camp directors often emphasize camp as a “mountaintop experience” but fail to demonstrate that it is much more than a “spiritual high” that quickly fades.⁵ It is a common critique that camp often functions as a singular experience, but the purported barrier between the camp experience and everyday life or church engagement is much more porous than this critique suggests. Camping ministries in the mainline Protestant traditions studied tend toward integration and partnership with congregational ministries. Stronghold Camp in northern Illinois, for example, intentionally rejects the idea of manufacturing a *mountaintop experience* and instead focuses on accompaniment. “They may not even be walking to the mountaintop right now,” one longtime Stronghold staff member explained. “But wherever they are, wherever they’re walking, we’re there walking alongside of them.” The camp experience does not function on its own but rather as part of a larger ecology of faith formation, and congregational ministries play an essential role in helping participants process and make sense of the experience.

Camp participants rated seventeen identical items related to faith formation on the first and last days of camp. The two items that showed the most significant growth were: “It is important for me to belong to my church/congregation” and “I have important things to offer the church and the world.”⁶ These findings suggest that increased desire to engage with church ministries is one of the most consistent outcomes of the programs involved in the study. Findings from the site visits support this finding. Camp participants in each of the diverse program settings were actively considering how their faith practices at camp fit into their lives at home and in the congregational setting. The presence of clergy members and other congregational leaders at camp helped facilitate this engagement. The United Methodist Church (UMC) camp program at Lake Tahoe is an instructive example. The pastors of the two congregations partnered to conduct confirmation training in the camp form. Their primary aim was to alleviate the problem of students missing classes by providing a set block of time for all of the instruction. They discovered that confirmation camp participants showed a remarkable level of ongoing participation in the life and ministries of their congregations years after being confirmed. The increased involvement led to greater investment in confirmation ministry itself, with four recently confirmed high schoolers present for the Lake Tahoe experience, along with several adult volunteers from the congregation. Camp became a true congregational endeavor, with more leaders present than confirmation students. Switching to the camp form effectively interrupted the pattern set by previous confirmation classes in which students had largely disengaged from church life immediately after confirmation.

These findings from The Confirmation Project corroborate findings from secondary analysis of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR found that 39 percent of all American teenagers have attended a religious summer

⁵Karen-Marie Yust, “Creating an Idyllic World for Children’s Spiritual Formation,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 11, no. 1 (April 2006): 182.

⁶Significance was determined by t-tests. For the first, $t(136)=3.923$, $p<0.001$. For the second, $t(128)=2.893$, $p<0.01$.

camp at least once, and this includes more than half of mainline Protestant teenagers.⁷ Secondary analysis of these data found that the youth who attended religious summer camp were significantly more likely than their peers to participate in communal religious practices (including church attendance) five years later. This study also showed that those who attended camp as youth were over three times more likely to remain religiously affiliated five years later than their peers who did not attend.⁸ The scholarly evidence is building that one of the most significant outcomes of the Christian camp experience is ongoing engagement with Christian community.

Camps and congregations need to partner in these efforts of engagement. The national survey of camp leaders indicates that more than three-quarters of camps in the traditions studied have program philosophies where “camp worship/programs are designed to get campers more excited about and engaged in their home congregations.” The survey also indicates, however, that more than a quarter of these denominational camps have a strong faith emphasis combined with a weak connection to congregational ministries and teachings.⁹ Mainline Protestant denominations facing financial insecurity tend to divest themselves of ministries considered questionably valuable, and clergy are willing to do without camp if it is understood to be merely fun and games. This results in some camps pulling back from their commitments to congregational ministries that have largely abandoned them. These partnerships must not be allowed to deteriorate because it is clear that they benefit the ongoing vitality of the church. Strengthening these partnerships starts with camping professionals recognizing that they do not operate in a faith vacuum and ministry professionals recognizing that camp is much more than fun and games. Kids returning from camp have not had an amusement park experience but rather a deep experience of the Holy that they need to process with faith mentors. There is important theological reflection happening at camp, and the young people are leaving with an increased desire to participate in the life of a congregation.

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The Confirmation Project offers clues to the factors that contribute to these powerful camp experiences, and these will be explored in the final four *big ideas*. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of the camp experience is rooted in four

⁷Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54.

⁸Jacob Sorenson, “The Summer Camp Experience and Faith Formation of Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 26–28.

⁹This classification resulted from the combination of multiple survey items related to the faith teachings and program philosophies of the responding camps.

main aspects: Christian community, unplugging from the home environment, taking young people seriously, and taking experience seriously.

BIG IDEA 3: CAMPS TAKE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SERIOUSLY

“Fellowship and community building” was one of the five survey items that camp directors rated as more important than fun. Campers and camp staff highlighted the importance of community above all other aspects of the camp experience. The community experience contributed to their sense of self, growth in faith, and overall enjoyment of camp. The entirety of the camp experience was structured with the rhythm of daily Christian living. Participants began and ended each day with Christian devotional practices; they worshiped together, prayed together, read scripture together, ate together, played games together, and slept in the same space. Interactive games and group activities, particularly the ropes courses, were designed to facilitate community building and the development of trust. It was in the context of this trusted community that campers engaged in faith practices and participated in educational sessions.

It is difficult for many ministry professionals to shift away from an understanding of education as a process of covering content. The confirmation camp program at Camp Lutherlyn in western Pennsylvania involved the campers spending portions of each camp day in educational sessions with the attending pastors. In one session, a pastor presented a lesson on the Apostle’s Creed using the teaching style of direct instruction. The students followed suit by adopting their accustomed learning postures (slouched in their chairs with eyes glazed over or wandering). Discussions with the students afterward confirmed that they were largely disengaged (or “checked out,” as they put it). What happened next is instructive. Two of the students approached the pastor during free time later in the day. What they asked surprised him: they wanted to know how he came to believe in God. This was incredibly moving for the pastor, and he proceeded to tell them his faith story. The students were not interested in the information that he had to teach them; they were interested in him as a person. The camp experience provided the container for this powerful relationship to play out. Campers and staff members indicated that some of the most meaningful and impactful conversations happened during unstructured and informal time, something that a series of short confirmation class sessions rarely affords.

It is important to recognize that the camp communities studied were not idyllic but rather embedded in the messy realities of day-to-day living. A Stronghold camper got emotional as he spoke of his challenging home life, and one of his cabinmates gently reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. This group of boys was one of many observed that supported one another through the challenges that they faced in daily life, including one cabinmate living with cerebral palsy. “The campers, like, we *care* about each other,” one boy at Camp All Saints in northern Texas said emphatically, to the agreement of his cabinmates. All Saints has adopted an intentional model for helping participants work through

disagreements and conflicts together, and this model is grounded in the baptismal covenant of the Episcopal Church. The director referred to the camp experience as “one of the last models of 24/7 discipleship” that exists. “You can’t just go home,” he said. “You can’t just take your ball and leave. When there’s a real issue, there’s a real good chance you’re going to have to work through it.” The intensity of living in close quarters with the same people began to wear on the participants at all of the camps. Time and again the young participants learned about forgiveness and reconciliation not as disembodied ideas but rather with real people in communities that mattered to them. “At camp, you have to *deal* with people,” one Stronghold camper said bluntly in the presence of his cabinmates. The effectiveness of the camp model suggests that intentional group building activities may be as important to the Christian education process as covering educational content, and community building may even be a prerequisite for an effective learning environment.

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BIG IDEA 4: CAMPS ARE PLACES TO UNPLUG

One element that facilitates Christian education in the camp environment is that participants are physically removed from their home environments for an extended period of time. Unplugging from hectic schedules allows time for experiencing new activities, and it also allows confirmation leaders time and space to engage the young learners in deep reflection on a variety of topics in successive days. The separation also gives participants a new perspective on home and church. Campers indicated that they are constantly thinking about and comparing their experiences at home and in church with what is happening at camp. It is interesting that they reported having fun and valuing the new experiences, even as they were conscious of the disorientation of being away from home. Homesickness actually emphasized a sense of individuation for the campers, as they understood the experience as part of growing up and deciding what they believed. “You’re your own responsibility,” one All Saints camper explained, “because your parents aren’t there to tell you to do this and to do that.”

Part of the disorientation for camp participants was being away from technological devices like cell phones and computers. There was no structured question in the focus group protocol related to technology, and yet all nine camper focus groups brought up absence from technology as part of what made the camp experience different from home. A minority of the participants indicated that separation from technological devices contributed to a sense of discomfort with the camp experience, but the majority voiced the benefits they saw in being away from their devices. Some contrasted their tendency to get mired in the technology world with

the ability to be active and to be outside. Campers most strongly associated the absence of cell phones and the internet with the community atmosphere of camp and the ability to authentically interact with fellow campers and staff members. “Usually when you’re at home, you’re spending time with technology,” one UMC camper reflected. “Here, you’re spending time talking *to* each other and, like, not on screens.” This literal unplugging from technological devices is a common feature at mainline Protestant camps and may be an increasingly valuable contribution to Christian education in a world that is increasingly reliant on technological devices. Summer campers are not the only ones recognizing camp as a break from technology, as 92 percent of respondents to the national survey of camp directors agreed with the statement, “Camp is a place to unplug from technology.”

BIG IDEA 5: CAMPS TAKE YOUNG PEOPLE SERIOUSLY

Campers and camp staff repeatedly highlighted the theme that camp is a place where they can be themselves. They felt safe from being judged about their beliefs, and they had the strong impression that their opinions were taken seriously. These impressions were based in part on a strong identification with an affirming community. The campers also recognized that they were intentionally included in decision-making and leadership at camp. Every camp visited involved campers in worship planning and leadership. They all included testimonies in some form. Campers were able to choose activities they wanted to participate in and even helped plan the daily schedule. The camps also adopted the tradition of forming group covenants, which allowed the campers to articulate in their own words the guidelines that would structure their community living throughout the week. All of these elements combined with the physical distance from the home environment to give the campers a strong sense of ownership and a feeling of autonomy.

When it came to Christian education in this environment, it was very important to the campers that learning was on their own terms and participatory. “When we have a Bible study, it kind of makes sense,” one Stronghold camper reflected. “We all share what we think about it, and at church it’s just someone who talks about it, and we all have to try to bear with it or something.” Essential to an effective learning environment at camp was the ability to ask questions. Confirmation campers at Lutherlyn were excited about The Snake Pit, a time period set apart for them to fire whatever questions they wanted at a group of pastors. The camper surveys indicate that some campers experience significant growth in multiple measures of faith formation and Christian education, while others do not. Campers who showed more growth in faith were also likely to agree more strongly that their questions about faith were taken seriously.¹⁰ This finding is instructive for Christian education in multiple settings. Prioritizing a set body of material can easily lead to an environment in which students feel that their questions and

¹⁰Correlation coefficients with two separate measurements of faith formation and the item “My questions concerning faith were taken seriously” were 0.611 and 0.465, with $p < 0.001$.

concerns do not matter, especially when that material needs to be covered in a short period of time. The national survey of confirmation leaders also supports this idea, with about two-thirds of confirmation programs including “inquiry-led discussions: discussion based on questions from the youth” as an instruction method. The camp research demonstrates that young people are much more engaged in their education when they feel like they have ownership and that their ideas matter. The baptism experience in Lake Tahoe was possible because the young people were given agency in their faith journey. They had been hearing all week about the importance of taking ownership of their faith, and at the moment when they sought to apply this content to their lives, the community was there to support them and wade through the choppy waters beside them.

BIG IDEA 6: CAMP TAKES EXPERIENCE SERIOUSLY

One of the most fundamental characteristics of the camp experience is that it is active and recreational in nature. Participants learn by doing. “Experiences of or encounters with God” was one of the five survey items that camp directors prioritized over fun. Campers, staff members, and directors highlighted the importance of being able to live out the faith rather than just talk about it. Camp is full of new experiences that have tremendous educational value. Novel experiences like kayaking under the full moon on Lake Tahoe form powerful memories. One Stronghold camper explained her experience on a high ropes element called Leap of Faith: “I feel like that helps you with everything. Not just having the courage to jump off a thirty-foot pole, but just to do things that you’ve never done before.” Yust sharply critiques camp programs for compartmentalizing faith activities from fun activities, contending that many Christian camps are essentially the same as secular camps “with a spiritual gloss.”¹¹ However, the four camps visited demonstrated a high level of integration of faith practices and reflection with all of their programming. An All Saints camper explains, “A lot of people don’t even think about using God as a reference for anything. But I think if they went here, in a snap they’d just think a completely different way about relating everything to God.” The national survey of camp directors indicates that the four camps visited are not alone in this intentional integration. Fully 92 percent agree, “Faith formation/practices should be incorporated into all aspects of camp life.”

Camps are not alone in offering experiential learning. The national survey of confirmation leaders indicates that hands-on learning, games, and participating in Christian practices are common teaching methods, and the majority of confirmation programs (81 percent) use at least one of these methods. The big difference is that camps use experiential learning as the *primary* educational tool. Campers learn about God and engage in faith practices through bodily expression, and this most often takes place in outdoor spaces that facilitate multisensory experiences. Congregational leaders are often so accustomed to didactic teaching methods that

¹¹Yust, “Creating an Idyllic World,” 187.

they struggle to adapt their methods even in the camp environment. This played out in several camps when confirmation instructors defaulted to lecture and PowerPoint.¹² The most jarring examples for the researcher were when instructors at two different camps chose to teach lessons about God's creation *inside* rather than outside, with one drawing diagrams on a white board and the other using a projector. It was remarkable the way that students across the various camping traditions and regions of the country adopted similar learning positions in response to these methods: sinking low in their seats with eyes glazed over and reporting afterward that they were mostly disengaged or "checked out." As this familiar scenario played out at Stronghold Camp, a bat suddenly flew through the room, buzzing the heads of the excited confirmands, who were immediately transported from a boring classroom into an adventure. The bat, which the participants affectionately named "Bruce," made frequent incursions, much to the delight of the youth and the chagrin of the instructor.

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CONCLUSIONS

These findings push Christian educators to take another look at camp as a model of Christian education and faith formation. They invite scholars and ministry practitioners to not be dismissive or flippant about camp, as if it was just the fun-and-games wing of youth ministry, but rather seek to learn from camp and integrate these lessons into their discipleship ministries. Christian educators would do well to seriously consider the camp experience as an effective context for their educational programs, particularly confirmation and equivalent practices. However, the national survey of confirmation leaders indicates that fewer than 8 percent of all confirmation programs require attendance at camp, and the majority of these programs are in a single denomination.¹³ Roughly a third of confirmation programs across the denominational spectrum require attendance at one or more retreats, an experience that has the potential to incorporate many aspects of the camp experience. The Confirmation Project research justifies a sharp increase in these numbers.

The classroom model itself needs rethinking. Including multisensory activities and small group discussions are positive adjustments to simple didactic

¹²The national survey of confirmation leaders indicates that three-quarters of programs use one or both of these methods in their instruction.

¹³Evangelical Lutheran Church in America confirmation programs require camp attendance at a rate of 18 percent, with another 34 percent making attendance optional.

teaching methods, but these methods are severely limited in a classroom setting that relies on one-to-two-hour blocks of time. But the classroom remains the dominant setting of confirmation training, with 95 percent of programs requiring class attendance and 93 percent having class sessions lasting between a half hour and two hours. These sessions become one more thing for young people to cram into already hectic schedules, and they enter with the postures and attentiveness they bring to the school classroom. This makes faith one more topic to learn rather than a way of discipleship that shapes all of life. The camp experience offers a radically different model, in which everything is caught up with and dependent upon the activity of God, and there is a sort of hyperawareness that God is at work in the world. Christian educators can particularly learn from the camp model that group building is essential to the educational experience of young people and that Christian education must take bodily learning into account. If the primary educational strategies involve sitting still, the students may intellectually receive the content, but they will likely *learn* that matters of faith are boring, disembodied, and maybe do not matter to their lives.

The reality is that camp is not a magic formula. If there was a seventh *big idea* from the research project, this would be it. The anecdotal accounts and stereotypes that youth ministry writers tend to highlight are grounded in actual experiences. The camp model plays out in many different ways depending on the background of participants, the priorities of the camping ministries, and the competency of those running the programs. It is profoundly misleading to characterize all camp experiences as simple fun and games, but it is also unhelpful to promise *mountaintop experiences* or *life-changing adventures* to all camp participants. Many campers involved in The Confirmation Project showed clear signs of highly impactful and even life-changing faith formation, but the majority showed little or no measurable change, and some even showed evidence of negative faith growth. Interestingly, the few that showed signs of negative growth during the camp experience largely rebounded or even showed signs of positive growth in a follow-up survey six to twelve weeks after the camp experience. This is a clear sign that the camp experience does not end when the young people are picked up at the end of the week. They continue processing their experiences in the days and weeks after returning home, as they reintegrate into their home lives. The camp experience has the potential to be highly effective in forming Christian disciples, but much of this potential is dependent on the larger ecology of faith formation, especially the congregation and the home. One of the most promising findings is that camp participants at these denominationally connected camps left with an increased desire to engage in the ministries of their home congregations. This ongoing engagement, when supported by their faith networks, can break the pattern so common in mainline Protestantism when recently confirmed young people promptly disengage from congregational ministries.

I sat in the beautiful outdoor amphitheater at Camp Lutherlyn in western Pennsylvania trying to come up with a way to characterize the Christian camp experience. I listened to the babbling of the nearby creek while the sun peeked in

diagonal beams through the tree canopy to shine on the rough-cut wooden cross. Then I heard a shout from beyond the trees to my right: “All clear?” From out of view to my left came an answer: “All clear!” Then came a distinct “Woo-hoo!” followed by a progressively louder z-z-zz-zz-zzz-Z-ZZ-ZZZ-ZZZZ. The zip line passed right behind the altar, and I saw the young lady fly by the rough-cut wooden cross. Maybe the Christian camp experience can be thought of as *a zip line through a sanctuary*. A zip line is much more than a joyride. It is a high ropes course element that greatly challenges participants to face their fears while they are held with the tangible support of a caring community. They are literally held *on belay* while their fellow campers encourage them in the climb, cheer them as they zip, and are there to help them down at the end of the line. Christian camps locate this powerfully tactile experience in the context of Christian faith teachings and practices. This creates tremendous opportunities for young people to reimagine life itself as caught up with and dependent upon God and to rethink the nature of a sanctuary. The elements all work together in the camp experience: the zip line, the sanctuary, and being on belay with a supportive community. When a participant reaches the end of the zip line, they simply hang there by the harness until someone puts a ladder in place. One of the essential pieces of the camp experience is what happens at the end, and the same is true for confirmation ministries, which sometimes end abruptly with a public rite of confirmation and celebration. Congregations and other Christian educational ministries can offer valuable support to ensure that participants of both camps and confirmation programs are not left dangling on the end of the line, and they can help the young people process the experience by walking alongside them once their feet are back on solid ground. ⊕

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