

Is This Christian Camping?

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“Watered-down values are wounding our ministries.”

Christian camping is dead.

I don't mean camps aren't thriving across America. What I do mean is that many have sold their souls to American culture.

What do people today want in their camping experience? They want a high-tech, activity-filled experience complete with all the comforts of home. They want high-profile, dynamic speakers with PowerPoint presentations, worship bands, and the latest audio equipment. They want Internet access, cell phone capabilities, and easy parking close to their cabins. They want jet skis, boats, ATV's, snowmobiles, go-karts, mountain bikes, ropes courses, and mountain-climbing equipment.

I spoke recently at a family conference held at a resort-like retreat center on a lake. The setting was beautiful: a pristine lake, lofty pine trees, hundreds of trails, sandy beaches, flowers, and views too numerous to mention. Talk about a camp where you could get away from the hectic pace of the city. Talk about quiet and serene. Talk about opportunities to be alone with God. Not a chance.

I was shocked at the schedule. Beginning at 6:30 in the morning and lasting until midnight, the program was crammed with every activity imaginable. There was literally not a moment in the day without at least three or four activities happening. Water skiing, jet skiing, jogging, walking, exercise classes, hot tub Bible studies, boat trips, ice-cream-making events, swim relays, seminars, junior excursions, movies, four-wheeling, zip lines, rappelling, organized hikes, mountain bike races...I was exhausted just reading about it.

The first evening, I noticed the fatigue on the faces of the adults and youth in the audience. These people made a decision to *retreat*, to get away from the hectic pace of modern life and relax in a natural setting, unwind, and be alone with themselves and nature. The opposite happened.

Here's the sad part: The people at the conference loved it. It was the "best camping experience they'd ever had." Families were thrilled their children were never bored, mom and dad had time to get away from the kids, and the program was "top-notch." People were signing up in droves for next year's conference.

But they were exhausted. You could see it in their faces; you could hear it in their voices. Camp was not a retreat; it was an extension of the life they were leading back home. My hunch is that it took weeks to recuperate.

Many Christian camps could drop the word "Christian." To them, Christian camping has become nothing more than secular camping with a little Jesus thrown in. If camps want to move ahead with purpose, they need to glance back at the true meaning of camping ministry.

No Spiritual Substitutes

People today are craving a deeper relationship with God, and many don't even realize it. How has Christianity responded? It's become the spirituality police. Christians criticize and warn of the dangers that come with trying to satisfy the human longings, rather than responding to those needs with the only thing that can fill the God-shaped void. Every camp and conference center in the United States should have distinctive markers of the Christian faith evident at their ministries, such as prayer walks, spiritual directors, and prayer rooms. Instead Christian camps, scared to death of the words *meditation* and *contemplation*, have decided to be entertainers.

Too Much to Do

Doing drives more camping (*retreat*) programs than *being*. Instead of adding more activities, camping professionals (*retreat planners*) should ask themselves some tough questions. How are pockets of inactivity created? How can camp (*retreat*) schedules be arranged so that people unwind, slow down, and have time to pay attention and notice their Creator? How can the atmosphere be shaped so that people listen to what the Lord has been whispering?

Most importantly, why ignore the very reason of the ministry's existence? Camping facilities are located in forests, on lakes, in the mountains, and on rivers because the environment lends itself to stillness.

Decades ago, Christian camping's founders walked camp properties and said, "This place is beautiful; you can feel God's presence here—the magnificent, towering trees, the singing birds, and the abundance of nature. Let's build a camp here so people can get in touch with God in the surroundings He created." Now, these same ministries are trying to get permits to build a mini-Disneyland complete with water slides and skateboard ramps. To move into the twenty-first century, camps (*retreat programs*) need to return to the last century where camping was a retreat, an adventure in nature, and an environment of solitude and quiet.

Turn Down the Volume

Again, the reason for retreat is to escape the noise of the culture. In modern Christian camping (*retreat planning*), noise has been substituted for quiet, with deafening sound systems blaring out worship music, surround-sound movie clips, and video productions. I'm all for being relevant. But camps (*retreat planners*) must never let the need to be relevant supercede the need to be quiet enough that God's voice can be clearly heard. "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10) urges us to create sanctuaries of quiet, not *American Idol* sets.

Be a Risk-Taker

In the process of trying to be all things to all people, camps have substituted profit for risk. I am not naïve. The company I own is a profit-making business. Indeed, camps and conferences should pay their bills, and profits are not bad. What is negative is when money begins to be the taskmaster, when making a profit becomes the bottom line, and when financial gain drives the programs.

Every camping ministry should budget money for experiments; for seeking new ways to do camping. Jim Slevcove, who I believe is the pioneer of modern camping, programmed a very successful variety of camps at Forest Home in Forest Falls, California. Each year, he created a new program that had never been tried before. He was always pushing the envelope, inviting risky speakers to traditional conferences, and hiring innovative people who he knew would change the way camping was done. I remember the Blue Helmet program, where troubled youth spent a tough week working in nature; the CILT program, where very young kids were trained to counsel other children; and the radical Area Development program where junior high students actually *worked*, building a fish hatchery as part of their camping experience.

"Risk is too risky," you may say. "It might affect the bottom line, so let's do what we've always done."

While bills must be paid, finance must not overpower function.

Move out of the Box

Finally, sameness has been substituted for imagination. Camping should be the place where imaginations run wild. Outdoor ministries (*summer camp and retreats*) should be hotbeds of creativity, utilizing the unique natural gifts at camps and conferences for activities such as midnight moonlit walks, early morning breakfasts on the river bank, amazing stories told by the campfire, or weekly adventures created by the campers. Camping (*retreat*) leaders should be known for memory making.

The trouble is, creativity and imagination generate insurance risks. Plus, creativity is susceptible to mistakes and failure, and it fosters controversy. In other words, imagination is a threat to the bottom line. Sameness, on the other hand, builds predictability, which caters to those who don't want to be shaken from their comfort zones.

But you're Christians. You follow Jesus, the master of surprise. **Jesus created memories every place he went by doing the unexpected.**

Christian camping needs to take a good, hard look at how it has been secularized. Are camps truly places of spirituality, refuge, quiet, risk, and imagination? Instead of racing toward the latest twenty-first century technology and recreational trends to make the camping experience more meaningful, it's time to take a look backward at the heritage of Christian camping and the timeless truths of God's Word.

***“Camps must never let the need to be relevant
supercede the need to be quiet enough that God's voice can be clearly heard.”***

Mike was a co-founder and owner of Youth Specialties, a youth ministry training and resource organization. He was also lay pastor of Grace Community Church (Yreka, Calif.) and author of two books. Mike is now in the presence of Jesus after a fatal accident in 2003 (just months after this article appeared in the CCI Journal). His wife, Karla, continues his work through Youth Specialties.

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