

## CAMP AND THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

"Our camps and retreat centers are a key part of the whole ministry of the church." - Ken Hawley, assistant director of discipling ministry for the Office of Congregational Life of the Executive Board of the Mennonite Church USA.

The above quote begs the question for the Church of the Brethren, "What is our understanding of our camps relationship to the ministry of the church?" Are they there to provide just another summer option for the entertainment of our children or is it something much deeper and life impacting? For years we have heard it said that many of our church leaders can look back to a summer camp experience as a life changing time for them. Several years ago a survey was given to incoming freshmen at Christian college campuses that affirmed that the camping experience was far more effective than youth programs, Sunday school, or church programs in pointing lives to the way of Jesus.

What is this relationship between camps and congregations that fosters this impact for the whole ministry of the church? It can best be described as a partnership. There are several aspects to this partnership to explore.

- Faith Formation - The numbers of hours of exposure to faith formation experiences in a week of camp exceeds the number of hours experienced in a year of Sunday school. The impact grows exponentially when you consider the exposure is without interruption of normal daily living issues. The partnership comes alive through local congregations providing mature Christian leadership as volunteers for the summer camping events. What better way to teach than to have leaders that live out the message that they are teaching. It is not so unusual that leaders who offer themselves also have their own faith strengthened through their experience at a week of camp. Faith formation also occurs at events for adults that congregations can hold at our camps. There is something that adds to the impact of an event if you can get away for a while from the daily interruptions of life to work on issues of faith.



- Creation Awareness - We read in John 3:16-17 that God sent his son into the "world" not only for those who should believe in him but that the "whole world" would be saved. All too often we have focused only on the human condition and have failed to acknowledge that as believers in Christ we carry responsibility for all of the creation that God pronounced as "good." What better place to get reacquainted with the world that God created for his pleasure than at camp. This rekindling of a relationship with creation is even more critical as we begin to hear evidence of the ability of exposures to nature beginning to reverse behavioral issues of children. (See Richard Louv's "The Last Child in the Woods.")



- Leadership Development - Camp is a place where children and youth are given the opportunities to take leadership responsibilities, often for the first time. In some camps there are formal programs on camp leadership training, but in all camps that are times when leadership is encouraged and mistakes are accepted as part of the risk-taking that is necessary for learning.

- A Place Set Apart - In Mark 6:31 Jesus invites the disciples to "come away" with him to seek rest. This is one of the ministries that our camps offer to members of the church. They are special places set apart where people experience the presence of God. In a world in which the pace continues to increase, our camps serve as a place of refreshment, regeneration, and renewal. Some camps offer opportunities for Sabbath times as support to pastors and other church leadership.

- Ecumenical Involvement - One of the ministries that keep our camps as healthy ministries is the providing of hospitality to groups of many faiths. Is it possible that we have overlooked this ecumenical ministry as a vital ministry of the church? Being able to offer this ministry is often the very thing that makes it possible for us to have our camps available for our use in the summer. At a time when the numbers reported for membership in the church is cause for concern, the use of many of our facilities is continuing to increase as we serve others in the name of Christ.



It is essential for the church that we come to a place where we understand the importance of this commitment to a partnership in ministry. If we reach that point then both the congregation and the camps can continue to grow in health. "As part of the body, camps and retreat centers are healthiest when the connections with congregations are strong. Together we can build each other up and reach out to those in need." - Ken Hawkey