

Lutheran Camps: A fulfilling experience

By Dr. Craig S. Oldenburg and Mary Oldenburg

“My junior high daughter came home from camp wanting to talk about her faith.” Would you like to read a letter like that? Would you like to be the parent, hearing your child say those words? I read those words from a mom in 1994. I still remember the summer camp staff who had this particular camper and this experience, helped me to understand the difference between *just doing camp* and *leading camp purposefully*.

Those of you who grew up immediately following World War II may remember summer camps as a mainstay of life. Old camps grew, new camps were built, and it seemed everyone went to camp.

More recently camps have been questioned. The organized church has been at the heart of this questioning. The fear of “bad religion” has been used to discourage families from being away over weekends. Even the fear of churches not receiving the weekend offering has kept some church leaders from encouraging what was once considered to be a key opportunity for faith development in young people and families.

The reality is that partnership of camp and local church is a vital relationship *if we are truly concerned* with faith development.

Smalley and Trent, in their book *The Gift of the Blessing* (1993), listed several activities in which grown-up kids felt they had received the blessings of their parents as children. The one activity they said was mentioned most often was “camping together as a family.”

In *Practicing Passion* (2006), Kenda Dean writes that two experiences shape faith more than anything else—the experience of serving in missions together and retreating (or attending camp).

Not everyone is called to

be a pastor; however, studies document that a majority of pastors made their decision to enter “professional” ministry at a camp/retreat or as a result of a camp/retreat experience. Many pastors and church leaders who dare to differentiate and use camps for faith development state that more gets done attending one week of camp with their youth, than in an entire year of confirmation classes.

Camps are unique to faith formation.

Why Lutheran Camps?

Martin Luther was clear that the best way for children to learn about faith was through “hopping and skipping”—the language of their lives. He even wrote that adults who often go to church and come away numb to the entire experience should be taught in the way that children are taught.

When this “teaching” takes place in the context of a Lutheran camp that has trained its staff in key Lutheran theological perspectives, the opportunity for faith to be understood as a gift (see Eph. 2:8-10) based on God’s love for us, as opposed to a decision, is enormous. Those of us who are Lutheran camp directors see it all the time.

In the LCMS there are more than 30 camps across the United States that list themselves as affiliated in some way with the teachings of the LCMS.¹ Some are owned by districts, some have board members approved by the district and others are owned independently but serve the purposes of the district. They were mostly built by Lutheran church organizations, many at the conclusion of WWII, to provide local churches with



a camp that fits their theology and culture. These camps have grown and matured and understand the role they play in powerfully portraying Jesus Christ through outdoor experiences. They understand their role in missional outreach also—several camps even take “campers” on international mission trips. A majority of LCMS Servant Event opportunities take place at Lutheran camps.

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I can find no better theological perspective than that of the LCMS, and it is the basis for why I lead and serve at a Lutheran camp. It is why I value and encourage CHOICE as a key element of summer camp. It is why I value and encourage COMMUNITY and COLLABORATION.²

It is Lutheran theology that forces me to consider the healthy physical and supportive TOUCH that takes place at camp as a way in which God chooses to heal the world through the body of Christ—the Church. It is what forces me to develop activities and EXPERIENCES that help campers see the commandments as something that catapults them forward into behavior that does not just walk the line of the law but a life “as if it knew no law” (see the Large Catechism’s definition of the third use of the law) in their respect for God and care for neighbor, belongings and livelihood.³

Finally, it is actually Lutheran theology that helps me see how children, youth and family faith is formed through kinesthetic activities, late night campfire conversations, and the creative meals that only camps can supply in their unique context. Lutheran camp, as I define it, is much more than the fun it portrays. The Lutheran camp is the best avenue for the solid faith formation, skill building and character shaping desired in early adolescent confirmation classes, and by parents who highly value the faith formation within themselves.

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¹ See www.nloma.org The National Lutheran Outdoor Ministry Association is a loosely connected group of individuals who represent LCMS Lutheran camps.

² You are welcome to see Craig’s book, *Experiencing Safely*, for a full theological explanation to active and playful learning methods.

³ See Luther’s “What does this mean?” sections of the Small Catechism and re-read them as opportunities to live out love (as opposed to avoiding wrong).

Saying No by Saying Yes

An Interview with Dr. Micah Parker

I had a memorable opportunity this month to catch up with a long-time friend and former colleague Micah Parker. Thousands of youth and adults will recognize Dr. Parker as “the trust guy” from his engaging talks at several LCMS National Youth Gatherings on trusting Jesus Christ with your entire life, regardless of the circumstances. Along with being the founder of Trustguy Ministries (www.trustguyministries.com), Micah is athletic director at California Baptist University.

With the potential for a non-stop schedule, Micah works hardest at being intentional about life with his wife, Amy, and their three children. I set out to gain insights from him about the priority of family life.

Chance or Choice

Before his work as athletic director, Parker spent several years coaching at the university level. He talks about the decision to leave coaching because he was not spending the amount of time with his family that they desired:

When you feel like you’re not spending time with your family, when you can’t worship together 75 percent of the Sundays, all that stuff adds up. Jonah was two years old at the time and he associated dad with the phone. I had worked 17 years to get to the level of coaching I was at, but in the end it was the right decision [to leave coaching]. We can look back and see how God completely blessed that decision. . . .

Micah’s university position, speaking schedule and family priorities don’t allow for much discretionary time. His wife jokes that Micah would have to schedule free-time to survive—and free-time is typically family time. “You have to make choices about family over other free-time options, whether that family time is doing something fun or just getting things done around the house. Family is my hobby,” says Parker.

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Family does not become a priority by chance. Micah shared that his appreciation for family increased through the tragic sudden death of his first wife. He thoughtfully reflected on how that great loss honed his gratitude for the gift of family:

I really think I’m a different husband and dad because of what happened with Corrine. I totally believe I was a good husband for her. I know that Corrine loved me and that I was a priority. But having had that [relationship] and then to have

that taken away . . . well, I'm reminded constantly about how much I've been blessed. When something happens with my kids, it doesn't take much for me to think back to a time when I might not have even had kids. My wife and my kids are not mine—they're on loan from God and I better enjoy them and have a relationship with them because they could be gone. I know I could also be gone at any time . . . I want there to be absolutely no doubt with my kids how much I love them and always wanted to be with them, and that time with them was a priority.

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Family with a Mission

A mission statement defines an organization's purpose for being. When an organization knows its purpose, it can more easily make decisions supporting that purpose. This is equally true for families. Quite simply, what you say "yes" to, will more easily determine what you say "no" to. The Parkers' "yes" is based on Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Micah elaborates:

I like Romans 12:1 because it basically says everything you do should be to honor God. You could take the [phrase]: 'Honoring Christ through . . .,' and you could fill in whatever that is—honoring Christ through being a good dad, honoring Christ through being a loving husband . . . With our family time we will ask, 'How will we honor what God has given us in family by this decision?' If it's going to maybe take away from what we are trying to do as a family, then maybe we need to say no.

The Parkers made a decision to be a one-car family so that, with the money saved, their children can attend Christian school. They reaped an unexpected benefit with family time. Micah pointed out, "There are many things we have to say "no" to because of just having one car . . . It stops us from sometimes doing needless things. Some people might think we're crazy. But I believe if we had two cars, we could get caught up in driving kids in so many different directions and become overloaded."

Kids and Time

Managing our time so it reflects our values is a challenge for most adults. Guiding our children to do the same nurtures a priceless life skill. The Parkers have identified expectations that guide their children's time use, for example:

Regarding entertainment media: "We are fairly strict about limiting what we call 'complete time wasters' like video games and TV . . . so that our kids don't get into the habit. . . ."

About family roles: "We also give them chores to do so they understand they have responsibility for how the family runs—it's not just mom or dad doing it all. They have to contribute to what's going on in the family."

About outside activities: "Our culture today says throw them in [to an activity] as early as possible and then have them specialize right away. Amy and I want them to be active and involved, but want them to experience a little bit of everything instead of specializing in one thing until they are a lot older. We try to be very intentional about this. Emma is doing well in swimming right now. She could be at a workout every night and be at a meet every weekend and go on a traveling team, but we're not going to do that—she's in fourth grade!"

Staying the course

Challenges to family time abound in our hurry-up, do-more culture. I asked Micah what his family does to support their commitment to keep their family values as a priority. One of the key strategies he talked about is connecting with other families:

We try to have our kids play with other families that share the same values so that we're not the only ones saying "no." We have friends that we can point to and say that their kids don't have everything either. And we've had friends tell us they appreciate it when they can say the same thing about our family. *It's about spending time with people who are going to have the same values because they are in the same boat, going through the same social structure and cultural pressures you are going through* [editorial emphasis].

As we wrapped up our conversation, Micah brought up the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25, where Jesus uses a story to teach about responsibility. Micah applied this to family: "If you've been blessed with a family, you're responsible to do the best you can with what you've been given. It's a huge responsibility. Parents are wise to realize they can't do it by themselves. I'm not in control of everything. I do the best I can and leave the rest to God."



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