

INTENTIONAL CHANGE WITHIN A SPIRITUAL YOUTH CAMP

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on dynamics associated with intentional change within a spiritual youth camp. Singular variables that have direct impact and abstract issues that provide a cultural context will be addressed. The reader will be able to understand these variables and issues in ways that support recognition of these phenomena in other types of settings. Within this report a philosophy of transformative spiritual leadership rests on the notion of “retreat.” Physical retreat from our daily environment that can serve as reminder of our daily routines, cognitive retreat from tasks that occupy our minds, emotional retreat from common habits of the heart and spiritual retreat that removes us from our usual spiritual sense of place. This kind of detachment from physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual reminders helps with reflection on possibilities in each of these areas.

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This report will address dynamics associated with intentional change within a spiritual youth camp. In doing so I will cover singular variables that have direct impact and abstract issues that provide a cultural context. It is my desire for the reader to be able to understand these variables and issues in ways that support recognition of these phenomena in other types of settings. Clear descriptions will help to enhance this understanding.

My philosophy of transformative spiritual leadership rests on the notion of “retreat.” Physical retreat from our daily environment that can all too often serve as reminder of our daily routines, cognitive retreat from tasks that occupy our minds, emotional retreat from common habits of the heart and spiritual retreat that removes us from our usual spiritual sense of place. This kind of detachment from physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual reminders helps with reflection on possibilities in each of these areas. The idea of “retreat” is key to this process of speculating about possibilities.

The spiritual youth camp I am focusing on has met one week each summer since it was founded in 1955. The camp began as an outreach ministry of the Gahanna Community Church. Second Community Church (an African-American congregation in Columbus) was also part of the early establishment of the camp. The camp was founded under the auspices of the International Council of Community Churches which is 45% African-American, 45% European-American

and 10% other backgrounds. The current ICCC president is African-American and the executive director is Asian.

It is an interdenominational camp that meets at Tar Hollow State Park in southern Ohio. Campers come from all over Ohio and surrounding states. I have attended each summer since 1966. An overall objective of the camp is to provide a setting for the camper (ages are 6th grade thru high school graduate) to have a spiritual experience that can serve as a means for greater self-awareness and appreciation for their self-potential. The camp session generally includes about 180 campers and 70-80 staff (counselors, cooks, & support staff).

No religious denomination is promoted and the religious backgrounds of camp participants (campers & staff) is varied. The camp is commonly described as being spiritual but not denominational. A goal at the camp is to break down barriers to self-expression. Since campers are ages 10-18, peer pressure influences are particularly strong and these peer pressures can greatly inhibit self-expression. Thus, steps are taken to create an environment that rewards genuine sharing and discredits typical peer pressures (i.e. judging others by their clothes, physical appearance, language usage and racial/ethnic background). Campers typically come to the camp with a set of peer pressure oriented norms that staff seek to dilute. The result is usually a normative vacuum that allows more spiritually oriented value norms to evolve. "Taking a child—or yourself—out of a daily routine and allowing them to experience nature and worship in new and different ways helps them to be open to spiritual ideas and formation."¹

The means to this end is a collection of activities that consistently celebrate the worth of each individual. Such activities include songs that everyone can sing, periodic use of a "rule of silence" for time to reflect, daily small discussion groups, at least three spiritual services a day (a morning watch, afternoon chapel, and evening vespers), a Thursday night baptism service, a Friday night awards ceremony, the informal evolution of nicknames, emphasis on cabin units (all campers live in a cabin with at least one counselor) and classes (hiking, swimming, sports, etc.).

No one denominational perspective is stressed and religious services are generally not led by sanctioned clergy. Spiritual faith is emphasized throughout a typical camp day. Campers participate in a "morning watch" each morning before breakfast. A rule of silence (no talking) is observed during the morning watch. The morning watch offers a 10-15 minute period of quiet reflection guided by a one page handout with thoughts for the day and recognition of the camp theme. "A growing body of recent scholarship identifies Christian summer camps as significant settings for spiritual growth."²

After morning watch, breakfast is preceded by a prayer that is typically offered by a volunteer camper. Mid-morning activities include an hour-long discussion group period that will generally include discussion/reflection regarding spiritual faith. Lunch is preceded with a prayer much like the breakfast prayer. Mid-afternoon activities include a 30 minute "chapel" service that usually includes a couple of camp songs, readings (poems, prose, and thoughts) by

¹ H.G. Gary, "Happy Campers," *In Trust* (Summer, 2021) www.intrust.org

² C. Clements, "Experience and Christian Nurture in Youth Ministry," *Journal of Youth Ministry* (Fall, 2018), 22.

campers, a main speaker, and a closing prayer. Dinner is preceded with a prayer. There is an early evening vespers, much like the afternoon chapel, that usually includes camp songs, readings, a main speaker, a performance by the camp choir, and a closing prayer.

A final worship service may occur during the course of the evening depending on the scheduled evening activities. At a minimum, the camp day will close with a "friendship circle" where all campers and staff will form a large circle, sing some camp songs, listen to some closing thoughts from the camp directors, and have a closing prayer. When campers return to their cabins for the night some cabin counselors will lead faith-centered discussions or, at times, Bible readings.

Evening program worship services include the following. Sunday night features a "Never Walk Alone" service in which first-year campers and counselors are escorted, one at a time by veteran campers, to a large camp fire. The rule of silence is observed and, after a speaker, the camp community sings "You Never Walk Alone". The Thursday night program has two religious services at the lake: 1) a baptism (by immersion in the lake) service and 2) a late evening vesper service. The final night (Friday) culminates with a communion service, usually held outside, that closes the evening. The rule of silence that is observed during the communion service continues to be observed throughout the night until Saturday morning.

Singing is a unique part of the camp experience. The simple act of singing together perpetuates a singular spiritual camp spirit. A unified voice is realized. This type of bonding has been described in other camp settings. "The heart of LSU (Lutheran Summer Music) was making music and living in community. . . .The spiritual dimension of community played a large part in this formation."³

Campers and staff come from a wide range of backgrounds and, even with all the diversity, participants come looking for "safe-haven" from the negative pressures of school, family and trying to understand themselves. Campers share their feelings and consistently console one another in a manner that creates an almost surreal camp-wide comfort zone. Dedication to the group and respect for the individual is consistently stressed. Thus, although there are conflicts during the course of the week, the camp is frequently referred to as "heaven on earth," "the way things ought to be" and "my favorite week of the year where I can get away from the world." A camper from another camp summed it up with "Camp is a way to get away from our troubles. But this break from reality can't last forever."⁴

A unique confirmation of camp identities occurs with the Friday night Awards Ceremony. On Friday afternoon camp staff deliberate and vote on recipients for the Camper of the Year, Theme Awards (male and female), Most Improved Campers (male and female) and Rookie of the Year (male and female). Campers vote on the Counselor of the Year Award while staff are deliberating. The staff selects campers who receive a wide range of other awards that acknowledge camper behavior during the week. The Awards Ceremony is a very supportive environment with applause and vocal support offered to all award recipients. Not all staff agree

³ J. Baker-Trinity, "The Gift of Lutheran Summer Music," *CrossAccent* (Fall/Winter 2017) 477. www.alcm.org

⁴ H. Kendzor, "Finally a Camper," *Teen Ink* (September 17, 2020) www.teenink.com

with the giving of awards. I do not participate with award deliberations but most staff support the custom.

There are a variety of camp activities that indirectly and directly encourage campers to be less concerned with social norms and inhibitions. There are many silly songs that campers and staff sing throughout the week. Often time's new campers are hesitant to engage in such singing because it is childish. But when they see staff and older campers participating, most new campers will begin enthusiastic participation within a day. Campers are humorously "forced" to sing or dance at meal time. Such "performances" are wildly applauded. Thus, inhibiting social norms are dismantled and new, less restrictive, norms are promoted.

Campers, rather than staff, typically serve as speakers at religious services throughout the week. Speakers will often share revealing thoughts they have about themselves and their lives. They receive unconditional support from the camp. This phenomenon breeds more and more self-disclosure from speakers throughout the week. The realization that individuals can share their weaknesses, insecurities, dreams and aspirations, and not be ridiculed, has a very positive effect. That they will receive support from the group is almost intoxicating. "Camp is messy . . . It is about providing space for relational encounters and interactive play. . . .The purpose of the activity is the process itself. Theologically, this is known as discipleship."⁵

Many of the camp activities are a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves. There are a variety of sports classes and outdoor activities (i.e. Swimming, fishing & hiking). The goal is not to produce greater athletes or catch big fish, rather it is to provide a climate that promotes fellowship among campers. Each cabin creates a stunt (skit) for Stunt Night. The goal is not to develop acting skills, it is to promote cabin unity and stronger interpersonal relationships. Songs are sung in many of the camp settings throughout a typical camp day. The goal is not to produce excellent singing voices, it is to produce a unified chorus of the collective camp mind. "Camp is a setting where non-routine experiences have the possibility of capturing the imagination; leading a young person to greater openness to the Holy Spirit."⁶

The camp improves the sense of self and sense of others. The camp since its inception has consistently stressed interaction among diverse groups in American society. Diversity exists among campers and staff in areas such as racial & ethnic composition, economic class, religious background, staff occupations and residential locations (i.e. urban, suburban, & rural).

There is considerable economic diversity among the campers and staff. The camp draws from the very poor and affluent of American society. Campers do not spend money at camp, they are discouraged from bringing money, so money is not an influential factor during the course of the week. The staff works to downplay economic differences among campers. Camp is frequently described as being "special". I interpret the "specialness" as being linked to the camp environment that allows for interaction relatively free of societal inhibitions.

⁵ J. Sorenson, "The Logic of Camp in Christian Education," *Theology Today* (Vol. 76, No. 1) 2019, 61.

⁶ B. Williams, "Theological Perspectives on the Temporary Community/Camping and the Church," Unpublished Manuscript. Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College, 2002, 5

This allows for the spiritual sense of self to evidence itself and individuals will interact with one another in a uniquely genuine manner. The collective mind of the group is strong.

Camp provides a unique environment for growth of the individual via growth of the group. Measuring the effects of this growth is very difficult because, while some changes are immediate within an individual, other changes will not occur until much later. Spiritual seeds can be planted at camp that do not come to fruition until long after the camper has left camp. Understanding the constructs of such a spiritual experience is the first step toward measurement.

There is a spirituality that exists within the concept of assembly that is found at camp. “We can learn the meaning and practice of assembly ‘by heart’ Can we see again how important—even urgent—this gathering is? These questions can draw us into the possibilities of a spirituality of the assembly.”⁷ The annual gathering of the camp assembly helps to reinforce the idea of community within that context. It is a week of reflection regarding where we have been, where we are and where we are going. This reflective process can reveal the concept of burnout. “The idea that burnout results from a gap between ideals and reality is common in the research literature.”⁸ This recognition of burnout can occur on the individual and collective levels.

Collective burnout can occur within the church groups that participate in the camp community. Church leadership can address such burnout. “I long for America’s ‘mainline’ churches to find their public voice again, to break free from the paralysis of their corporatized structures and the terror of membership loss. Fear is a disempowering pulpit companion: it is a visceral, not a theological, thing.”⁹ As such, I have observed how we each can play a powerful role in dealing with adversity that is illustrated in the literature I have reviewed. The following offers an example. “Doris’s parents had an expansive vision of Blackness. Her father taught her at a young age that throughout the world people of color were the majority, which mitigated any feelings of inferiority as she grew up.”¹⁰ We may not be able to fully overcome unfair circumstances but at least we can grasp the realities we are confronted with as an initial step toward dealing with such circumstances.

Given the significant representation of non-white participants throughout the history of the camp there has been focus on challenges confronting non-white populations in the United States and non-white authors. Howard Thurman offered illustration regarding the relevance of associations we establish with the sense of place and people and his affiliation with Martin Luther King. “Perhaps the ultimate demand laid upon the human spirit is the responsibility to select where one bears witness to the Truth of his spirit.... I felt myself a fellow pilgrim with

⁷ G.W. Lathrop, *Assembly: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2022), 18.

⁸ J. Malesic, *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2022), 71.

⁹ P. Storey, *Protest at Midnight: Ministry to a Nation Torn Apart* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2022), chapter 26.

¹⁰ A.M. Mingo, *Have You Got Good Religion: Black Women’s Faith, Courage, and Moral Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2024), chapter 1.

him and with all the host of those who dreamed his dream and shared his vision.”¹¹ The desegregated context offered by the camp made it something of a liminal space during the early years of the camp in that desegregation was not common then. “Liminal work in liminal space is complex work, requiring stamina and resistance.”¹² The cultural challenges being addressed in the larger society do find their way into our camp sessions but we seek to address them positively and minimize their effects.

The focus on prejudice and racism call into question the role of the church with social justice issues. Barbara Brown Taylor shares how the church can be largely absent from such matters.

“Over the years I have met students who could recite the sixty-six names of the books of the Bible in order, but had no idea how or when those books were assembled into a sacred library.”¹³

I have observed considerable naivete with these kinds of issues at camp and have drawn parallels with other circumstances when we are confronted with the unknown. “No one would ever marry if they really knew what awaited them . . . Love’s job is to dope you up so that you don’t notice or care that there’s a giant-size trowel aimed at your heart just ahead down the road.”¹⁴ Reality can be daunting at times.

Knowing what to do and say can be exceedingly challenging. Much akin to trying to negotiate uncharted territory without a road map. Liz Tichenor explains how efforts to console her through her grief were perceived by her as concurrently negative and positive. “The shit people sent in sympathy cards very nearly drove me over the edge, pouring acid into my broken-open heart. At the same time, the love people sent in cards was saving my life. Neither of these statements is the slightest exaggeration.”¹⁵ The same can be said of the camp community when trying to understand the hurt experienced by another person of a different background.

An aspect of the camp setting is that the wide range of backgrounds represented within the camp community come to the camp with an equally wide range of interpretations for what the camp is and what it should be stressing. This exposes the rhetorical reality that most phenomena in our environment do not have inherent meaning but, rather, we assign meaning to such phenomena. That is, there is a social construction of reality at play. I will focus on a narrow area of camp life in this report that will allow me to address a specific domain of concern that can be covered within the page count allotted for this assignment.

¹¹ H. Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 255.

¹² L. Withrow, *Leadership in Unknown Waters: Liminality as Threshold to the Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Lutterworth Press, 2020), 79.

¹³ B.B. Taylor. *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 140-141.

¹⁴ R.J. Weems, *Listening for God: A Minister’s Journey through Silence and Doubt* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 156.

¹⁵ L. Tichenor, *The Night Lake: A Young Priest Maps the Topography of Grief* (Berkeley, California: Counterpoint Press, 2022), 44.

The founding directors of the camp were heavily invested in the idea of motivational appeals that inspired members of the camp community to aspire toward modified versions of themselves. They believed in giving formal awards at the end of each camp session via an Awards Ceremony that occurs on the last night of the camp session. My functioning within the camp setting as part of the pastoral staff positions me to recognize how the emphasis on such awards occurs in opposition to the spiritual objectives the pastoral team is seeking to promote.

Our pastoral team seeks to promote a spiritual environment whereby each person can recognize their spiritual evolution without necessity for a formal recognition stressing that some campers have grown more than others. This awards process is also problematic in relation to there not being consensus among the staff regarding who is most deserving of such awards. Worse yet, more often than not, there is a belief at the end of most camp sessions that children of camp staff tend to be recipients of such awards. I believe that there are times when such ratings/rankings are part of a growing experience, such as the assignment of grades in academic classrooms, but this giving of awards is something we bring on ourselves.

Looking ahead, I think the best approach for addressing this awards issue is to confer with other members of the pastoral team and see if we can build a consensus among us regarding the best path forward. This would provide a means for gauging how much common ground we share regarding problems associated with the giving of awards and how we might best address differing viewpoints that support the giving of awards. At a minimum this would help to generate awareness of the issue and to consider possible options.

The telos (or ultimate end) that can link with a hypothesis is that my spiritual leadership with this matter can serve as means to promote dialog and reconsideration regarding the giving of awards. I am hesitant to bring this matter up for discussion with the entire camp staff in relation to it being a topic that could be polarizing. Two other members of the pastoral team (ministers from two churches we are affiliated with) submitted a motion during a meeting that we cease giving awards. This motion was submitted during a staff meeting when the camp staff was making nominations and voting on award recipients. There was no discussion. They were basically ignored by the senior leadership of the camp.

This is a delicate issue and an issue that offers means for the camp to gain practice with resolving controversy via a spiritually aware process. Usage of such a spiritually aware process can provide us foundation for addressing similar issues in the future. Much of the camp experience is about seeking to learn about others and different points of view. Such a spiritually oriented means allows us to concurrently learn about ourselves.

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