The Long-Term Importance Of United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries

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The most recent survey of United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries revealed that nearly 1 million people of all ages journey annually to places established by The United Methodist Church as sacred common ground. For many this may come as a surprise, since our camp and retreat ministries are organized regionally and until the last few years we did not have a glimpse into the overall impact and the number of persons touched.

In the midst of God’s creation, these environments of Christian hospitality and learning open people’s souls and hearts in unparalleled ways. Experiences of lives changed for the better have been so consistent over time that local churches, conferences, and individuals caught a vision resulting in one of the largest networks of camp and retreat centers of any denomination. We are truly blessed as a community of faith to have the privilege to be stewards of such a gift used by God in the loving transformation of individuals and in the transformation of the world.

Through grace and the dedication of many spiritual leaders there are now more than 220 United Methodist Camp & Retreat Centers spread far and wide. What draws so many? What are they looking for and finding in our midst? What is it about United Methodist camp and retreat ministry and the settings themselves that remains so relevant and important today and for the future? How can the church utilize these ministries more strategically?

When we, as a Church, consider our current strengths in fulfilling and expanding our mission of “making disciples for the transformation of the world”, it seems crucial to recognize that we have an avenue already in place that can play a very significant role in the emerging visions and goals of the church as we move forward. The effectiveness of these centers relates directly to the depth of their connection with the ongoing mission and ministry of the Church itself, as these ministries...

1. CONTINUE TO LIVE OUT OUR WESLEYAN HERITAGE
2. PROVIDE INTENTIONAL PLACES APART TO CONNECT WITH GOD
3. EXTEND GENUINE CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY AND COMMUNITY
4. NURTURE FAITH AND DISCIPLESHIP
5. DEVELOP CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL LEADERS
6. DIRECTLY COLLABORATE WITH UM CHURCHES AND AGENCIES
7. TEACH CREATION CARE AND APPRECIATION
8. EQUIP GUESTS AND GUEST GROUPS TO DO LOVE AND JUSTICE
The waters nourishing modern camp and retreat ministry run deep within United Methodist heritage. They sprang forth in the 1730's when John Wesley made a fundamental decision that would launch the Methodist movement into the mainstream of an historic "spiritual awakening" that flowed across the British Isles and then rolled into North America. With colleagues, he boldly chose to move preaching and faith formation into the "open air" where the people would have new access and avenues to hear and respond.

At first, even Wesley wrestled internally about the viability of what he was doing. He wrote in his journal, on Saturday, March 31, 1731:

"In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church."

During a reading of the "The Sermon on the Mount," a realization eased Wesley's heart and mind. Jesus often taught outdoors and trained his disciples there. Christ himself also set the example of regular retreats into nature for prayer, discernment, and renewal. On top of this biblical recognition were the practical results. New people responded by the thousands. Those who were already Christians were encouraged and grew spiritually giving clear evidence that the spirit was moving and blessing the endeavor.

Nurturing faith in the outdoors and "field preaching" turned out to be an amazing asset to the church. It is one factor behind the expansion of the Methodist movement. This gathering of relative strangers and persons of very diverse backgrounds, many not used to attending church, would have been difficult to pull off in the highly structured services of England at the time. Initial experiences of faith formation and decisions to follow Christ were followed by systematic encouragement to continue to grow in discipleship through ongoing involvement with small groups and local congregations. This is, also, a crucial dimension of the best collaborations between UM camp and retreat centers and local congregations today. Though Wesley may not have foreseen modern day camp and retreat centers, he would clearly recognize their value and their importance.
Providing Opportunities for People to Quench Their Thirst for God

Christian retreats and camps tap into a universal human desire. Sometimes it is hard for people to articulate, but most persons long to connect more deeply with God. Our camp and retreat ministries are responsive to the widespread search in modern society that some cannot fully articulate, but which spark their interest in spirituality. Retreats serve as an oasis for the soul where people can quench their thirst for God. Here barriers are removed and space given so youth and adults can notice, contemplate and to relate with the ever-present Source of Life. The unabashed aim of faith-based camps and retreats is helping persons seek God with their whole heart.

Sabbath Rest

These places apart facilitate a connection with the Holy Spirit because the harried life of packed schedules and distractions is set aside for a time. People in our society aren’t used to slowing down, because we are pressed hard to be “productive” and to consume. Our centers offer a powerful alternative, so we try not to be a repeat of what persons commonly experience. Our primary goal is not to simply be activity directors to keep people busy and entertained, but rather we help persons “be” with God and “be” attuned to the sacredness of each moment. Sabbath is about pausing, in order to “taste and see that the Lord is good”. It is about freedom from slavery, in order to discover meaning and find renewal.

Silence, Solitude and Prayer

The role of silence and its power to help persons develop a greater sensitivity to God’s presence is echoed in the teachings of some of the great mentors of the Christian tradition who resonate with creative and passionate Christian mentors of our own time.

14th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said, "Nothing in all creation is so like God as silence."

Silence of the heart is necessary so you can hear God everywhere — in the closing of the door, in the person who needs you, in the birds that sing...

---Mother Teresa

Following the example of Jesus, we are teachers of prayer. UM camps and retreats give opportunities to learn many forms of prayer and to carry these practices home.

The Core of Christian Hospitality

There is a significant difference between the generic hospitality of hotels and other lodging facilities and what faith based camp and retreat centers do. Our primary intent is not to “rent” our facilities or to simply provide quality room and board, meeting spaces, friendly service, and programs in a pretty setting at a good price to get folks to come back. If that were the case, the church would not need to have camp and retreat centers because there are plenty of locations that provide rental space and entertainment. It is vital for the church to remember that their centers do far more than this, if one looks beyond the surface. What happens at UM Camp and Retreat Centers cannot be easily duplicated by going elsewhere.

In welcoming all guests and participants, we endeavor to do nothing short of offering a genuine experience of Christian community and the wide embrace of God. We live in a time when people long for connections, but often hesitate to reach out to form new relationships. Families move from place to place more often today than in previous generations, thus displacing them from tight knit family and friends. Individuals frequently are nothing more than acquaintances to their immediate neighbors. Even members of the same congregation may know each other only on superficial levels. Consider how rare it is for persons from different backgrounds to come together beyond their immediate family to actually live in the same place 24 hours a day in milieu founded on Christian love, even when that may not be their primary reason for coming. When people spend time in these sacred places for a week or weekend and are inspired to be a more caring community for each other, it can be and often is transformational.

Welcome the Stranger – Covenant to Love

Reaching out in welcome is an act of faith that embodies God’s love of the stranger which is a key tenet within Judeo-Christian spiritual teachings. Providing hospitality of this kind includes a type of vision and humility that recognizes that our role is not simply to host, but also to encourage our guests and participants to welcome and value each other and to overcome the differences and fears that would otherwise separate them. This does not apply only to our own UM congregations who come, but to every other group we host on behalf of the Church. In this way, we extend ourselves with purpose to the wider society. Christ often comes in the stranger who brings a blessing from God, so God is present in the guest as well as the host. There are numerous biblical examples, when an act of hospitality leads to a revelation from or an encounter with God. (Genesis 18:1-14, Luke 24:28-32, Luke 19:1-10)

A special gift of Christian camps and retreat centers that other types of camp and retreat settings rarely highlight is the opportunity to learn and practice the Christian path. The word disciple means someone who seeks and incorporates the guidance of a teacher – in our case Jesus Christ. Christian discipleship, then, is a growing trust in God that integrates Christian faith and teachings as a way of life. This priority is absolutely essential to our central purpose.

Provide Environments and Experiences Of Genuine Grace
Nurturing Christian discipleship begins with a very intentional way of relating with each and every guest and camper that reflects God’s love for them and God’s active participation in their welfare. It begins in the recognition that no one is outside the embrace of God, despite whatever challenges, regrets or failures. We are called to honor the divine with and within every guest and participant. This love which flows unceasingly even when people don’t yet recognize the source to be God is what John Wesley describes as prevenient grace.

Encourage A Growing Trust in God
The Holy Spirit continues to reveal more of God’s love until there is a realization of God’s abiding presence with and for us. This recognition invites a response - decisions of all kinds to move toward the Giver of Life. Oneness with God develops in the fertile soil of an expanding faith or confidence in God. As camp and retreat leaders, we work with the Holy Spirit to reinforce hope and decisions to live based on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. John Wesley calls this embrace of Christ’s love justifying grace.

Inspire Persons to Open Themselves to Transformation
Christian discipleship continues through the dedication to live one’s life as a follower of the way of love. This is no easy undertaking and spiritual teachers remind us that we cannot generate this love on our own power. The Holy Spirit will, however, work with us to transform the aspects of our personalities and lifestyles that cause harm to ourselves and others so that we can be an expression of Christian love more and more consistently. This help – this blessing – this energy to change and grow is called sanctifying grace by Wesley.

Leaders play a critical part in shaping the present and the future for good or for ill. Leadership training has aspects of personal development for the leader. If, however, the leader fails to engage, inspire, and prepare others to act, all that personal development never translates into actual leadership. Trustworthiness is foundational. It requires both “integrity and skill”. Integrity refers to the congruency between what a leader says and what that leader prioritizes and does. Skill implies ability and experience in effectively guiding beneficial group efforts.

Christian Spiritual Leadership-Servant Leadership
Most faith-based camp and retreat centers provide staff, board members, volunteers and participants with a plethora of opportunities to develop generalized leadership abilities, but if this is all we do then we fall short of our full mission. We seek to teach and nurture Christian Spiritual Leadership. Spiritual refers to “God”, which indicates that the leader intentionally seeks the Holy Spirit’s guidance and engages the individual or group being led to discern God’s purpose when choosing attitudes, direction and action. Christian, of course, refers directly to Jesus Christ. Jesus epitomizes Spiritual leadership, so we focus on his life, ministry and teachings as a guide. Jesus had some radical ideas about leadership - the one who leads is not the one who is served but instead is the one who serves.

Grow Leaders by Engaging Them in Hands On Leadership
Jesus frequently used planned and unplanned situations to draw out spiritual wisdom and reflection. This ability to observe life and then to engage people to consider the deeper meanings of experiences is central to the experiential learning emphasis at camps and on retreats. This aspect of Christian Spiritual leadership requires a true grasp of Christian teachings and sensitivity to where people are and what might move them further in their Spiritual journey. Emerging and veteran spiritual leaders learn to lead best by actually leading not just by studying leadership concepts. This is one of the great advantages of camp and retreat settings where many persons first sense their call to Christian vocations or dedicate themselves to making a difference in the world. Camps and retreats are a highly effective avenue for identifying and preparing persons for spiritual leadership within congregations and beyond. They are also outstanding settings for renewal and re-inspiration of leaders.

One of the most fruitful dimensions of United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries at their best is participation in the UM covenant connection. United Methodists deliberately choose to link together and join forces in a common mission. Our camp and retreat centers are not stand alone islands. Other types of camp and retreat centers may be private, independent operations, but United Methodist camp and retreat ministries are not. Even when our camp, retreat and conference centers are separately incorporated for legal, operational purposes, this in no way should diminish our involvement in partnering with United Methodist local churches, conferences and agencies of the larger Church in a combined effort to nurture faith in God and to reach out to meet true needs in the world together.

**Move Beyond the Boundaries of Our CR Centers**

In very practical terms, UM camp and retreat ministry leaders and committees endeavor to move beyond the boundaries of the camp and retreat center sites. Being too myopic hinders the ability to forge strong ties with fresh visions, dreams and possibilities that our wider partners are passionate about.

**Paragraph 130 of the Book of Discipline of the UMC: The Journey of a Connectional People**

*Connectionalism in the United Methodist tradition is multi-leveled, global in scope, and local in thrust. Our connectionalism is not merely a linking of one local charge (and/or extension ministry such as Camp and Retreat Ministries) to another. It is rather a vital web of interactive relationships. We are connected by sharing a common tradition of faith…and by sharing a common mission, which we seek to carry out by working together…*

**Become Informed and Collaborate**

Collaborations grow out of direct conversations and relationships with leaders of congregations and other agencies of the church. In this way, the programs and experiences we offer are more likely to resonate with true needs being addressed by our congregations and agencies. It is a blending of the vision of our center and the unique gifts and graces of camp and retreat ministry with the discernment of where God is leading UM congregations and leaders from the wider connection. Part of our mission is to bring the unique power of camp and retreat ministries as an aid in vital ministry goals within the connection.

It is crucial to perceive and value the unparalleled benefits of having persons spend time outdoors as part of the process of seeking and encountering God in new ways. The Church has placed its camp and retreat centers in natural settings on purpose. It is no accident.

**Encourage People to Listen in New Ways, because the Creation Speaks of God**

Psalm 19 begins by highlighting an abiding aspect of nature. The creation constantly tells the glory of God. Christian camp and retreat centers are uniquely poised to help persons learn to observe and appreciate these “voices”. The author of the gospel of John makes the additional point that all things come into being through the Word of God. God is communicating with us through the creation. The Gospel writer shares the good news that this same Word, also, lived and lives among us in Jesus Christ, thus making the link between Christ and creation. “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” Therefore, our relationship with creation matters and the effort to care for the natural world honors God. Notable Christian hymns such as, “This is Our Father’s World”, echo some of these long-standing teachings in stanzas such as, “All nature sings” and “God speaks to me everywhere”. “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale” represents a more modern hymn with a similar emphasis.

**Help Persons Learn about the Natural World as a Source of Wisdom from God**

Scriptures, also, point to the diversity of creatures and ecosystems as channels of wisdom and insight. Solomon, for example, was granted the gift of wisdom so he could lead the people well. According to scripture, King Solomon shared much of this wisdom in the form of proverbs and songs - many directly related to the natural world.

**The Goodness of Creation and the Call to Love**

Scripture and Christian tradition depict creation as a process that births a community, not human beings in isolation. God declares creation good over and over in Genesis 1. All life, as we know it, is tied together. We are a part of each other both theologically and organically. God loves the entire creation. Though we never worship creation any more than we would worship a human being, the story of Noah speaks to God’s desire to preserve species by requiring the gathering of two of every creature to assure their future along with humanity. Therein rests the Church’s call to follow God’s lead, to do the same and to teach others. As destruction of our planet mounts, the necessity of acting to care for creation is undeniable.

From its inception, our denomination has emphasized the inextricable link between Christian community and doing love and justice in the wider world.

**Covenant to Do Love and Justice**

Micah 6:8 The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8 makes clear that to do justice is an activity not merely a theoretical principle. The Hebrew word for “kindness” in Micah 6:8 is hesed, which means covenant faithfulness and/or steadfast love. Therefore, just as God has been faithful we are to be faithful in extending steadfast love. Finally, to “walk humbly” is best translated to walk carefully or circumspectly. Of course, the operative word is “walk,” which implies again that what the Lord requires is action, not just belief. This covenant can be lived out within the camp and retreat setting and by educating and motivating people to return home committed to lives of love and justice.

**Embrace and Support People Beyond Our Faith Tradition Doing the Work of God**

A lesson that Jesus lifts up prominently in the story of Good Samaritan is that people who love and do the work of God cannot be seen as limited to our own groups. Jesus, for instance, chooses a Samaritan as the example of one who has true compassion in loving one’s neighbor, rather than someone from his own faith tradition. Certainly he could have highlighted someone from his own tradition, but the point is that many groups and individuals are involved in doing good, avoiding harm, advancing justice and caring for others.

United Methodist Camp and Retreat Centers often host other non-profit and religiously affiliated groups dedicated to bettering the society in significant ways. We serve them, inspire them, thank them, and celebrate the good they do, because we understand their contribution at a much deeper level than they find in many other settings. To us, they are not “rental groups” or “other use” groups, they are partners in the transformation of the world. One of the great untold dimensions of the UM Church’s impact on the wider society involves our hosting of and collaborations with not-for-profit groups and their leaders who find renewal, plan their service to the world, and even carry out their programs at our camp and retreat centers. This, then, flows forth to touch countless persons beyond the borders of our sites. The UM Church provides a great blessing by opening its doors to schools, social service organizations, other religiously affiliated groups, etc., most of which could not afford to establish their own centers.