The State of Traveling Day Camp

The Camp2Congregation Project launched in early 2019 with the goal of assessing the impacts of Christian traveling day camp programs on congregations, families, and young leaders in the church. The study proceeded with six dimensions, looking at the ministry from the perspectives of 1) camp leaders, 2) church professionals, 3) parents, 4) summer staff members, 5) site visitors experiencing the programs and talking with participants (including the campers themselves), and 6) host congregations reflecting back on the experience. The first dimension of the project included an examination of the history and major goals of traveling day camp ministries from the perspective of camp leaders. It included a survey of camp directors who had active traveling day camp programs in 2018. These programs were identified using data from a previous survey of camp directors (2018) affiliated with Outdoor Ministries Connection (OMC).

A Brief History of Traveling Day Camp

Traveling day camp began as an outreach ministry of overnight Christian summer camps and can be seen as an offshoot of overnight camp's success. The earliest examples arose in camping ministries of the American Lutheran Church. In part, the new program was a response to sagging camper numbers in the late 1970s, which coincided with an economic downturn and the Baby Boomer generation aging out of youth camp. The first recorded traveling day camp ministry began in the mid-1970s in the Lutheran Outdoor Ministries in Oregon, where Jerry Olstad served as executive director. Historian Ralph Yernberg writes:

> *Although day camping was not a new concept in professional camping circles, it was in the Church. Olstad sent teams of staff into congregations to run week-long camps for children. The day camps looked like a spin-off of the Vacation Bible School programs, but it [sic] had significant differences. They used trained college age staff that brought fresh energy to the experience. The staff also provided new resources and a style that was based upon the small counseling group pattern familiar to camp programs.*[1]

Olstad became the National Outdoor Ministries Director of the American Lutheran Church in 1980, and his success with the traveling day camp program in Oregon soon spread to his colleagues. A number of directors met together at Green Lake Bible Camp in Minnesota to discuss the best practices of day camp and procedures for starting these programs at their camps. Yernberg notes, "The day camp model became a prime focus of camps across the country within a few years of its inception in Oregon." After the formation of the Evangelical

[1] Ralph Yernberg, *The Camping Movement of the American Lutheran Church, Volume 1*, (Ralph Yernberg, 2003), 39.

Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) from several denominational bodies in 1987, the traveling day camp model spread to additional camps that had been affiliated with other Lutheran denominations. By the turn of the century, about three-quarters of all camps affiliated with the ELCA had traveling day camp programs. However, the programs remained rare outside of Lutheran camping.

From its inception, traveling day camp was designed as an outreach ministry to further camp's visibility in local congregations and to enhance congregational ministries. As Yernberg notes, this model of ministry was attractive to congregational leaders in large part because of their familiarity with the Vacation Bible School (VBS) model. Bringing in young adult camp staff members brought new vibrancy to programs that were previously led by congregational volunteers (in the VBS model), along with the excellence of camp games, songs, and Bible study. These early programs sought to bring as many elements of the outdoor ministry experience as possible to the congregational setting, including programs focused primarily outdoors, nature study, camp crafts, engaging camp songs, and even campfires. These particular elements set traveling day camp apart from VBS programs. Yernberg notes that traveling day camp was successful in reaching children younger than those who typically attended overnight summer camp. He contends that this increased interest among younger children led directly to many camps adopting overnight programs focused on elementary age groups. It also served as a way to introduce camp to children who might one day attend overnight camp. Perhaps most importantly, it made camp highly visible in local communities and enhanced congregational partnerships.

The day camp staff members stayed in the homes of congregation members, spending the week interacting in the community. While their presence enhanced the experience for the elementary-aged campers, it also fostered goodwill among adults who were inclined to support the camp financially or send their children to onsite programs. These programs contributed to a deep sense of partnership between Lutheran camps and their congregational constituents at a level not matched in other denominations. In surveys of camp directors affiliated with Outdoor Ministries Connection in 2014-2018, Lutheran directors consistently rated partnership with constituent congregations and clergy involvement much higher than their colleagues in the United Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and United Church of Christ networks. This can be attributed, in part, to ongoing day camp ministries.

In 1997, the ELCA joined in full communion partnership with the Presbyterian Church (USA), a move that furthered ecumenical dialogue and cooperation in multiple ministries. Outdoor ministry became a key area of cooperation and dialogue, since both denominations had widespread camping networks. The first Presbyterian Church Camp and Conference Association (PCCCA) traveling day camp programs began within a few years of the full communion declaration. Camp Hanover in Virginia, for example, began their traveling day camp program in 1998. The denominational camping associations met together for the first time in November 2009 at Zephyr Point on Lake Tahoe. By this time, excitement for traveling day camp in Lutheran Outdoor Ministries (LOM) had begun to wane, though PCCCA camps were increasingly interested in the program as a new form of outreach, particularly in the wake of onsite camper decline in the midst of the Great Recession. As of 2018, more than a quarter of PCCCA camps had traveling day camp programs.

Traveling day camp programs have been comparatively less popular, or nearly unheard of, in other Christian camping organizations. United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries (UMCRM) began adopting the program in the 2010s, with the proportion of their camps operating traveling day camp doubling from 9% in 2014 to 18% in 2018. As of 2018, fewer than 10% of Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers were operating traveling day camp programs.

While it is fairly straightforward to trace the spread of traveling day camp in Mainline Christian camping, the program took a different path in Evangelical Christian camping. In fact, it appears to have developed independently, which led to important differences in the ministry model. SpringHill, a camping ministry with overnight sites in Michigan and Indiana, had grown to be one of the largest Christian camps in the Midwest by the early 2000s. Their interest in day camp began as a result of conversations with their ministry partners in Georgia at Camp All American, which served primarily as an on-site day camp. SpringHill began experimenting with sending teams of staff to a local community in 2006, in hopes of replicating the SpringHill experience at a different site as a day camp. They quickly built on the success of this early program, rapidly expanding to more than 100 day camp sites spread across 8 states by 2018, together serving more than 15,000 campers.

In contrast to the Mainline programs, which were generally seen as supplemental to already existing congregational programs and designed to feed directly back to overnight camp by offering community members a taste of the camp experience, SpringHill sought to export the entire program, creating self-contained SpringHill experiences at each host site. This involved considerably more summer staff members than the Mainline model, as well as high-quality equipment, such as large inflatables, archery supplies, and mobile rock walls. Mainline programs can generally be seen as affordable, convenient tastes of the camp experience, designed to whet the appetite for the main course of onsite programs. SpringHill envisioned their programs as full experiences of their ministry model, similar in both form and impact to the onsite experience. The SpringHill model focused heavily on outreach, with a goal of reaching unchurched kids in the communities they served and help connect them with congregations. Tony Schmid, one of the SpringHill staff members responsible for the early development of the day camp program, explained, “We didn’t want to be just another thing that this church offers. We wanted to offer a unique experience, reach out to the lost and connect them long-term.”

The traveling day camp model began to disseminate slowly in the Evangelical camping community through SpringHill’s close dialogue partners, including Pine Cove (TX), Forest Home (CA), and Eagle Lake Camps (CO). In 2019, there were still fewer than 10% of Christian Camp and Conference Association (CCCA) member camps that offered traveling day camp programs, and many of these were affiliated with Mainline denominations.

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As the Camp2Congregation Project started gathering data in early 2019, there were clear differences in both program models and enthusiasm between the long-standing Lutheran day camp programs and the newer programs, particularly those in Evangelical camps (exemplified by SpringHill). Most of the Lutheran day camp programs were considered

secondary to onsite programs, and enthusiasm for day camp was mixed. Several LOM camps had recently discontinued or sharply curtailed their traveling day camp programs. The reasons cited included lack of enthusiasm among congregations (exemplified by low attendance), cost-benefit analysis (since most LOM camps operated traveling day camp at a financial loss), and challenges of hiring summer staff members to staff both onsite and day camp programs.

Among 25 LOM camps that responded to the 2019 Camp2Congregation survey about traveling day camp, only a quarter said their day camp program was growing, while half said it was holding steady and the remaining quarter said it was declining. In other Mainline camps, two-thirds reported that day camp was a growing ministry (with the rest holding steady), and all of the responding Evangelical camps reported that it was growing. There were mixed reports about how much of a priority the ministry program was among LOM leaders. One leader summed it up, "We consider it a great way to stay connected to congregations, but it is not a focus of our programming." Another said, "Traveling Day Camp is in high demand from our partner congregations. It could easily grow. As a ministry priority for our organization, we are not as enthusiastic. We struggle with how many resources day camp pulls from the [overnight] sites, without bringing campers to summer camp." This second comment highlights the view that day camp is supplemental to onsite programs, designed at least in part as a feeder program to overnight camp. This perspective finds programmatic validation in the typical length of day camp programs. All non-LOM camps responding to the survey reported that their traveling day camp programs run for a full week, Monday through Friday. The same was true for only half of responding LOM programs, with the remaining half split between offering a partial day on Friday (ending by noon) and operating only Monday through Thursday. Directors indicated that programs ended early so that summer staff members could return to the camp property in time for the end of the week-long onsite programs. This practice seems to prioritize onsite programming over day camp and summer staff needs over congregational partnerships.

Directors outside the LOM community were generally very positive about their day camp programs, both in terms of current success and future potential. One Evangelical camp leader reported about traveling day camp, "[It is] a growing ministry that is becoming a priority. It is already our largest camp by number of kids and will soon be more than 50% of the kids we see as a whole for our ministry." A Mainline director said, "Growing rapidly. We began as a ministry of a residential camp but quickly outgrew that and became our own camp in 2016." This latter account is critical because it shows how one camp recognized the potential of traveling day camp as a ministry in its own right. Rather than seeing it as a program that siphoned resources from onsite ministries, it was given its own budget and even its own identity as a separate camp.

Cost can be seen as another way to show value. While a few camps offered traveling day camp programs free for participants as an outreach funded by special donations, most charged registration fees. The most common fee structures for LOM day camps were set prices for sending staff members to a site. The congregation typically contracted with the camp to bring in a set number of staff members, sometimes as few as 3, for a flat fee. This fee increased when additional staff members were sent. While some congregations passed part or all of the fee on to camper families, many offered the experience free of charge for participants, absorbing a cost that was, for some congregations, a large portion of their program budget. A small group

of LOM camps charged a registration fee per camper. When the flat-fee systems were calculated based on the average number of participating campers, the per-camper fee for a week of LOM day camp ranged from a low of $25 to a high of $135, with an average of $63. In comparison, the responding Evangelical camps all charged a per-camper registration fee ranging from a low of $150 to a high of $280, with an average of $227 (more than 3.5 times the cost of the average LOM camp experience). Most Evangelical camps also had a minimum number of campers for each day camp, which was generally around 60 campers and sent teams of staff members that numbered at least 20. In contrast, two-thirds of responding LOM camps (64%) operated day camps with fewer than 20 campers.

Taken together, we see that in comparison to LOM camps, Evangelical day camp programs charged participants more than three times as much money and averaged more than three times as many campers per site. The increased revenue enabled them to send at least five times the number of staff members to each site, along with high-quality equipment. It also allowed them to provide scholarships for families not able to afford the cost. In some models, including SpringHill, the congregation was obliged to provide a flat fee that was used for scholarships particularly targeting low-income families and families from the community that did not have a church home. The net result was that, in many cases, the number of campers attending a comparatively high-priced Evangelical day camp program free of charge (oftentimes 20 or more) exceeded the total number of attendees at a Mainline program.

There appeared to be two conflicting narratives about traveling day camp from the perspective of camp directors: 1) a stale ministry program that costs more in time and finances than it is worth and 2) an innovative ministry with expanding potential worth investing in. The camps that saw traveling day camp as innovative and full of potential were resourcing the ministry and experiencing growth, while those that saw it as stale or a low priority were not providing many resources and generally experiencing decline. One Mainline director summed it up, “If you don’t have the time or the resources to do it right it will fail. It is a major effort, but worth it if you’re all in.”

Regardless of how much the camp prioritized traveling day camp, responding directors were able to identify clear impacts that they had observed. The most consistent impacts they observed were related to outreach, with many noting that traveling day camp allowed them to reach people that they otherwise would not have through overnight camp, including underprivileged children. Others noted that day camp helped the church reach out to new members of their community and connect people to church long-term. Additionally, directors recounted examples of day camp introducing young people to their camp, with many noting that former day campers became campers and some went on to become summer staff members. The other major theme involved direct sharing of the gospel. Several directors noted that day camp reached unchurched families and included campers who were hearing about God’s love for the first time. The question for camp directors, therefore, was generally not related to impact as much as whether the program was worth the investment of time and money for organizations whose primary identities rested in onsite overnight programs.

Comparing Day Camp Models

Data based on a 2019 survey of camp directors operating traveling day camp programs (n=46)

	LOM Camps	Other Mainline	Evangelical Camps
% of all affiliated camps that operate traveling day camps	70%	20%	5%
Number of camps responding to survey	25	14	7
Typical program inception	1980s or 90s	2000s or 2010s	2010s
Typical fee structure	Congregational fee or per staff fee	Varies from free to per-camper fee	Charge per-camper fee
Average per-camper fee	$63	$70	$227
Typical camp week	Mon-Thurs or Mon-Fri	Mon-Fri	Mon-Fri
Typical daily hours	Varies each site. Some ½ day only, some 9AM-3PM	Adjusted to fit each site	Consistent. Usually 9AM-4PM or longer
Staff housing	Host families	Host families	Host families
Specialized staff	Staff rotate between overnight sites and day camp	Staff rotate between overnight sites and day camp	Specialized staff trained specifically for day camp
Typical # camp staff per site	3-4	4-5	20+
Smallest # campers served at a site in 2018 (average)	16	19	48
Largest # campers served at a site in 2018 (average)	82	68	311
Largest # campers served at a site in 2018 (actual)	121	155	408
Average # campers per site	42	39	121
Average # total day camp programs in summer 2018	17	11	86

Data and report compiled by:

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