



CAMP & CHURCH LEADERSHIP PROJECT

Phase 1 Report

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Introduction

The Camp and Church Leadership Project seeks to cultivate church leadership among young adults who have been engaged in Christian camping ministries. The project focuses on camps, congregations, and synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The initial objective was to identify the characteristics of the summer camp staff experience that nurture leadership for long-term faith formation, congregational involvement, and professional leadership. The subsequent goal was to apply these findings in specific contexts in hopes of enhancing the intentional leadership development of camps and strengthening the partnerships between camps, congregations, synods, and seminaries.

Phase 1 involved interviews with twenty-four former camp staff members active in the six ELCA synods of Wisconsin. Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews ranging in length from 30-60 minutes in February-June 2020. The interviews were transcribed and coded using an open coding method that established inter-rater reliability, followed by focused coding for all transcripts. The research team collaboratively developed thematic codes.

Research Participants

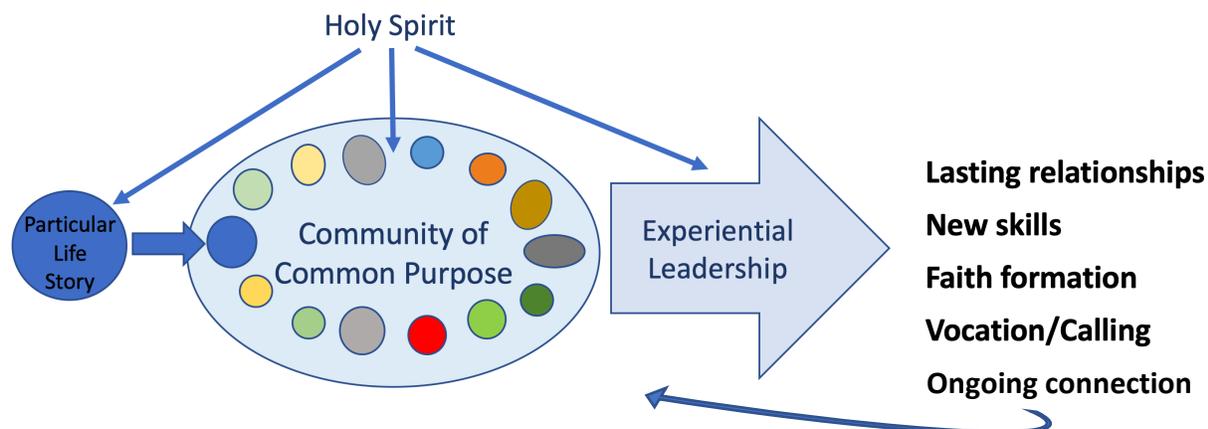
Synod staff members identified potential interviewees based on simple criteria to ensure a sample with a balance of gender, age, sexual orientation, and race. All interviewees previously worked at an ELCA summer camp. Each synod identified four individuals, two of which were rostered leaders in the ELCA and two of which were lay members of ELCA congregations.

The resulting group of twenty-four individuals included 13 males and 11 females. At least four identified as LGBTQ. Interviewees collectively worked at ten different Lutheran summer camps. They served for different tenures on summer staff, with four working only one summer and five working five or more summers. Half were ordained pastors in ELCA congregations, with an even gender split of male-female. Of the 12 lay persons, 6 were currently working in professional ministry or for the church (2 full-time camp staff members, 3 youth ministers, and 1 synod staff member) and 2 others had previously worked in ministry. The remaining 4 interviewees never worked in full-time ministry.

There was a 40-year age spread, with six interviewees each in their 20s and 30s, eight in their 40s, and the remaining four over 50. Nineteen of the interviewees were married, including seven who met their spouse while working at summer camp.

Findings Summary: The summer camp staff experience nurtures and challenges individuals during a crucial stage of life, leading to faith formation, skill development, life direction, and life-altering relationships.

Research Findings



“I wouldn’t be in ministry today if it wasn’t for camp...It not only created the space to wrestle and process and be okay with that, but it provided people who ‘got it’ and were willing to push when that was needed but also to just be there and realize that it was okay to cry and that I wasn’t going to have all the answers at that time. And so, I really don’t know that I’d be where I’m at today if it wasn’t for that space.” – Female pastor

Three major themes emerged in the data analysis. First, the summer staff experience is part of an interconnected ecosystem of faith-based institutions and other life influencers that constitute **particular life stories**. Second, these individual life stories interact with **three essential elements of the staff experience**: a community of common purpose, experiential leadership, and an openness to the activity of the Holy Spirit. Third, the interaction of particular life stories with these essential elements leads directly to **significant life outcomes**, the most common of which are lasting relationships, new skills, faith formation, a strong sense of vocation or calling, and ongoing connection to camping ministry or other forms of highly relational ministry. The above diagram illustrates the movement of individuals through the experience of working on summer camp staff.

Each of these major themes is detailed below, along with multiple sub-themes. Each theme or sub-theme is accompanied by one or more quotations taken directly from the interview transcripts. To preserve anonymity, quotations are attributed by gender and pastor/lay person.

Theme 1: The summer staff experience is part of an interconnected ecosystem of faith-based institutions and other life influencers. The particularity of individual faith and life stories affect each person's experience and how the experience is integrated into their life in coming years.

"There was a good six-year stretch where I [lived] at like eleven different addresses...And for me, I was always able to adapt and join a community when I also had the tie-in to a faith community. So sometimes I found that through a congregation and sometimes I found that through camp and sometimes I found that through campus ministry."

– Male lay person

Life Stories Impact the Experience

"I remember seriously crying about not wanting to go home. [Camp] was so beautiful, and my home life was a disaster. I had this immersive experience of love and compassion and community. I had no words for that as a young person." – Female pastor

- **Relationships:** Meaningful relationships shape the experience and are, in turn, shaped by the experience. This includes immediate family, close friends, and mentors.
- **Childhood experiences** and home life inform/impact camp experience.
- **Previous camp experiences** (camper or staff) help shape expectations/interpretation.
- **Faith background** interacts with camp experiences, especially including:
 - Congregational experiences/involvement
 - Faith relationships and mentors
 - Other key spaces and experiences, such as campus ministry and service work

"Campus Ministry was a lot in the head, camp was a lot in the heart. And there was kind of a synergy between the two that really worked well for me in those years."

–Male pastor

Formative Period of Life: The experience takes place during the formative period of emerging adulthood, when young people are transitioning from youth to adulthood and determining their life direction, values, and vocation.

"During staff training that second summer, I was really struggling...I'd get up and just kind of say, 'God, where are you? What's going on?' And just feeling this disconnect. But I remember how the staff and those who knew me from the previous summers just came around me and supported me and walked with me in that. They didn't try to fix me but were present with me in that and helped me get over – not get over it – but get through it and find something life-giving for that summer." – Male pastor

The Experience Impacts Life Stories: After the camp experience, life stories continue to determine the meaning of the experience.

“That’s how I really became a relational pastor. I’m part of the community, part of networking, that’s always been important to me. I think some of those values that we try to capture in a week of camp, I tried to capture year-round.” – Female pastor

- **Return to Camp:** Former staff oftentimes come back again and again to the place of camp: for additional summers, retreats, reunions, family camp experiences, and more.
- **Send to Camp:** They send or encourage others to attend in order to share the experience: children/grandchildren, friends, congregation members, youth groups.
- **Support Camp:** Former staff oftentimes seek to directly support the ministry of the camp, through serving as a volunteer, board of directors, or contributing financially.
- **Use Camp Model:** They oftentimes recapitulate the camp model in other contexts, particularly in congregations.
- **Meaningful Memories:** Throughout the interviews, former staff members shared stories and memories, oftentimes lost in the reverie of the experience.
- **Stuck in Camp:** Some former staff members feel disoriented after camp, struggling to move on from what is oftentimes a powerful experience. Some despair of finding a camp-like community again, which can lead to negative judgments on other forms of community and expressions of Christianity because of their contrast with camp.
- **Negative Experiences have Ripple Effects:** Negative personal experiences at camp can lead to intentional separation from camp and also intentional separation from other Christian communities, especially congregations.

“Faith seemed so real for me when I was on staff, and that sense of comradery that you have with one another, it’s such a wonderful feeling, even the summers where it didn’t feel like the staff gelled well together. I think that, I’ve wondered if God lets you rewind and live a year of your life over again I would say put all four summers together, let’s do that again.” – Male pastor

Theme 2: The summer staff experience has 3 major elements: a set-apart community united by common purpose, experiential leadership, and openness to experiences of God, especially through the movement of the Holy Spirit. These elements interact with each individual life story in unique ways.

“It’s a beautiful life, I think. It really combines centering your faith, centering in Christ, and centering in a natural setting, in a place that allows everybody to take a deep breath in, and a deep breath out without the distractions of these things, and other things going on. Yeah. I love it.” – Male pastor

1. Set-apart community of common purpose

“They just seemed really free and I really trusted their care for me after like a week, and wanted to be a part of whatever it was they had created. This world that they created, I wanted to be a part of, and they let us all be a part of it, which was cool. I think it was something of just encountering really authentic people who didn’t seem to care what anyone else thought, and they loved God, so he must be real.” -Female lay person

- **Relationships:** The most fundamental part of the summer staff experience is living and working in community, through which deep relationships are formed.
- **Mission/Vision:** Community members internalize the camp’s mission/vision, which helps to unite them in a common purpose. Importantly, the mission/vision includes directly impacting young people, welcoming all (campers, fellow staff, and guests), experiential learning, and intentional Christian community.
- **Safe space:** The community is based on trust and shared vulnerability. Staff members build trust through working together and sharing of themselves, creating a safe space for fellow staff members to be authentic.
- **Acceptance of diversity:** Diverse backgrounds of staff members facilitate openness to new ideas and feelings of acceptance. Community members are welcomed, accepted, and affirmed. Individuals come face-to-face with those who they otherwise may have dismissed or looked down upon, providing opportunities for reconciling friendships and new understandings. Conversely, when diversity is not accepted, it degrades the experiences.
- **Shared struggle:** Staff share in the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of camp ministry, which can be exhausting. They support one another through struggles. This shared struggle forges deep relationships, as staff members support others when they are down and experience grace when they are not at their best.
- **Extended (though temporary) time of interaction:** Staff members live and work together over the course of many weeks, allowing challenges and relationships to play out over time. The community is also temporary, with set beginning and end dates, allowing it to be a special set-apart time.
- **Staff training forges community:** The period of intense summer staff training at the beginning of the summer is an important time for staff members to forge community,

establish trust, and develop their shared mission/vision for the summer. The staff community sets the tone for the entire summer of ministry. When the staff community does not click, the ministry suffers.

“In reflecting on camp, I feel like that was the first time in my life I really experienced what Christian community was. And that’s been something that, ever since then, I’ve been seeking out in my life. And I think everything that I have done since then has been looking for that Christian community and trying to establish that.” – Female lay person

2. Experiential leadership

“I think it’s important to first, feel safe, but then also feel challenged and overcome that challenge so that when you’re put in the position to be the leader, you know that you can do it.” – Female lay person

- **Novel activities/experiences:** The summer camp environment facilitates new experiences and fosters the development of new skills. These experiences take staff members out of their comfort zones and helps them discover new talents.
- **Experimentation and Learning on the Job:** The acceptance of the staff community and use of novel experiences encourages experimentation and creativity. This allows staff members to try out new ideas, find their unique voice, and learn through trial and error. They learn that failure is an option and a path to new discoveries. They learn through doing.
- **Action/reflection:** A hallmark of experiential learning is reflecting on experiences. The relational nature of camp encourages consistent reflection on the novel experiences of the day, helping staff members and campers articulate what they have learned.
- **Plunged into Leadership:** Though they did not always feel ready, they were given the responsibility of teaching and leading a group of young people. Oftentimes, they were responsible to teach a group of young people something that they themselves were still learning. They learned they could lead by leading.

“I learned Lutheran Confessions in a very different way. I learned Scripture in a very different way because you were being equipped instead of being taught... We were being equipped for leadership instead of just being taught something that hopefully you took home and regurgitated at some point. You had to use those skills pretty quickly. You had a short turnaround... Without camps, we would lose a huge place of leadership development.” – Male pastor

3. Openness to Experiences of God

“I was encountering God talk in a different way. In the context of other people my age who were also encountering that, and it led to conversations about God that I hadn't had before, which I think then opened certainly for me those spaces where I encountered the Holy spirit and learned more about who I was and who God was.”

-Female lay person

- **Immersed in Christian Language and Practices:** Summer staff engaged in daily practices of worship, Bible study, and prayer. Through regular practices, they learned the language of faith and became accustomed to faith practices.
- **Interpretation through Faith Lens:** Experiences were processed daily through the model of action and reflection, with intentional consideration of how mundane and extraordinary experiences related to faith.
- **Awareness of Holy Spirit:** In the openness to God and recognition of experiences of God, staff became aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. There was recognition that the Holy Spirit was often neglected in Lutheran catechesis, which tended to focus on learning about God and Jesus' life.
- **Holy Place and Time:** There was a recognition the place itself (the camp) was holy, as was the particular time that they had there. The experience of God's creation added to the experience of sacred place. The special time applied to individual weeks and the entire summer experience. This opened an understanding that God is at work in the world in specific lives, specific times, and specific places.
- **Orthopraxy over Orthodoxy:** Experiences of God and actively developing new understandings of faith presented challenges to church doctrine and the intellectual faith that many had focused on before coming to camp. This led some to new understandings through integration, while others felt forced to choose between an active, searching faith and church doctrine.

"I think it means the sense of opportunity and variety. There are so many settings where you can worship and there are so many settings where you can learn. And that's, I think, the bottom line that I really took from working at and attending a Christian summer camp that it doesn't have to be in a sanctuary. It can be out in a field with a guitar and a Bible opened up. Boom, you have a worship." – Male lay person

Theme 3: The interaction of particular life stories with the three key elements (community of common purpose, experiential leadership, and openness to experiences of God) leads directly to one or more major outcomes.

"I've never seen anything bear fruit in someone's life more than camp."

-Female lay person

Impact 1: Lasting relationships

"It's all about the relationships I've made, I guess. I've never been a really spiritual person. Of all of my tools and all the things I'm good at at camp, it was never Bible studies or quoting Scripture or preaching or that kind of stuff. It was just being with people and making those relationships. For me, I guess, it worked...Just the relationships, like I said: my wife, several of my best friends. It gave me a community based around the church and, really, camp." -Male lay person

- **Friendships:** Summer staff members forge friendships that last for many years and even the rest of their lives, creating ongoing and mutual impacts.
- **Romantic relationships:** Many staff members find romantic partners at camp, and many of these continue in marriage.
- **Mentors:** Staff members form mentor relationships during the camp experience with older summer staff, full-time camp staff, and visiting clergy members or other caring adults. They also become ongoing mentors to some of the campers or younger staff. These relationships are oftentimes highly impactful on life direction and decision-making.

"There were about 15 of us that got together 40 years later. And it was so cool because we just had an instant bond. It was that community. It was that Christian community that was just shining through for all of us, on all of our different paths, but yet we were still all connected." – Female lay person

Impact 2: Vocation/calling

"It was at camp that I really discerned that call to ministry. I think there was something about living in a Christ-centered community that's loving, that is worshipful and centered on serving and caring for one another, including the campers who are there, that is transformative." – Male pastor

- **Affirmation of Gifts:** Staff members discover new gifts/talents and have their gifts affirmed by friends and mentors. The experience helps them gain confidence in their abilities and what they have to offer the world.
- **Discerning career trajectory:** Staff members are oftentimes at a time of deep discernment in their life when they are actively questioning their career path. The experience of working on summer staff can be pivotal in this discernment, with the aid of experiential leadership, spiritual seeking, and community input.

“It took me a while to think that I was called to be a pastor. But to have a whole summer of leading Bible studies, creating worships and preaching, and being told, ‘Wow, you’re really good at that,’ was a huge part of my call story, of hearing this external call that was there even before I thought about going into ministry.”

-Female pastor

Impact 3: Faith formation

“I was that kid, where it’s like, ‘God isn’t real. That’s not a thing.’ There was something that still drew me to the church, and I don’t fully know what it was. But eventually, I did go to camp. And I think that’s where at the end of it all, that’s where everything changed. That’s where I realized that there are very loving people out there, people who want to get to know me and who I am versus people who just feed off of small-town gossip. And after that I was all over church...And so I always say that there was a switch, there was something that flipped in my head, that just made me understand this whole faith thing, and this whole God thing. –Female lay person

- **Faith Ownership:** Summer staff members discover an opportunity to take ownership of their faith. Many transition quickly from a childhood faith in which certain beliefs were taken for granted to a thoughtful, active faith that provides meaning for their lives.
- **Appreciation for Christian community:** The experiences of faith formation at camp are tied intimately to the community experience, which helps connect the growing faith inextricably to Christian community. Away from camp, staff members tend to seek connection to Christian community in order to sustain and grow their faith.
- **Theological Identity:** Camp was a place for staff members to explore their theology and solidify their theological identity. In this particular study, working at ELCA camps proved highly impactful in developing a Lutheran identity.

“My faith really came alive. What I say is God became real to me for the first time. And so even though I grew up in a faithful family, God was someone I knew about, but I had no concept of a relationship with God.” –Male pastor

Impact 4: New skills: Through the novel experiences and experiential leadership, staff members discover new talents, skills, and personal gifts.

“I think, when I look at any professional success that I’ve had, I’m appreciative of my formal education, but I find that the skills that have served me well are muscles that I learned at camp, that grew there: how to be creative, how to work with kids, how to talk to kids, how to take God and make God particular and make God big, how to intuit into the moment and know when to stop whatever activity is going on, when to engage, when to stop a game so that they’ll want to play again.” – Female lay person

- **Hard skills:** Staff learn how to do specific things, such as horsemanship, fire building, rock climbing, and guitar skills. They may use these hard skills in a profession or as a hobby.

- **Soft skills:** Staff hone their leadership abilities, social skills, grit, group facilitation, and teaching experience, among other things. These soft skills are the attributes most commonly referenced as outcomes of the experience.

“Confidence in not only knowing who I was, but the skills, and gifts that I had, and acknowledging that. I think it really helped me be adaptable and flexible because every day's a little bit different. That's a big part of how that impacted me, especially when I think about what I do now. I'm constantly on my feet every day in classrooms. I have students asking me questions, and so I think that being in an environment like that made me more prepared for an environment such as this.” –Female lay person

Impact 5: Ongoing connection

“If I hadn't had a taste of that community, I don't think I would have possibly been as involved in the church as I have been. Because I wanted to find that again. I've always been looking to be a part of that type of a community.” – Female lay person

- **Camp Engagement:** Summer staff seek to reengage or recapitulate their experience. For many, this means serving on camp staff in future years. For others, it means returning to camp for staff reunions, retreats, or visits. For others, it means bringing their families to camp in the future or sending their own children. Other means of ongoing engagement include serving on the board of directors and giving financially.
- **Church/Congregation Engagement:** Many connect their camp experience with their congregational experience, leading to deeper engagement in congregational ministry in the years following their service on camp staff. This connection to congregational ministry also circles back to camp, as former staff encourage members of the congregation to sign up, send their children, and give financially.

