



CAMP 2 CONGREGATION
PROJECT

CAMP TO CONGREGATION: ASSESSING THE OUTCOMES OF CHRISTIAN TRAVELING DAY CAMPS

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Many of the earliest examples of summer camp in the late 1800s involved pastors taking groups of young people on week-long camping excursions (Paris, 37-39). As the summer camp movement gained popularity and professionalism after the turn of the 20th century, Christian churches continued focusing on a camp/conference hybrid model in which congregations sent young people to camp and church leaders led the programs. Following World War II, Christian camping worked to emulate the wider summer camp movement by moving toward professionalization of camp leaders and establishment of permanent sites. There was a gradual paradigm shift away from camps as merely places where congregations sent their young people towards camps as partners in ministry that could offer direct benefits to their constituents.

One innovative program, developed specifically at Christian camps, was traveling day camp, in which camps sent trained summer staff members to lead day camp programs at host congregations. These programs began in Lutheran camps in the 1980s, and they spread slowly to other denominations before being adopted by several large Evangelical camps in 2007 and following. SpringHill, an Evangelical camp in Indiana, has become the nationwide leader in traveling day camp, operating more than 100 sites annually and serving more than 16,000 campers in 2019. While SpringHill and other Evangelical camps are investing heavily in traveling day camp, convinced of their impacts, many Lutheran camps have begun questioning the value of these programs, focusing instead on their overnight camp programs.

Recent research has provided evidence for the impacts of overnight camps, including the unique characteristics and outcomes of Christian camps (Sorenson, 2018), but traveling day camp has not been examined. Previous studies have included day camp programs alongside overnight programs in the analysis of camp outcomes (Thurber et al, 2007), but there is little evidence for how outcomes differ among camps that offer both overnight programs and day camp programs. The specific impacts of traveling day camp are even less understood.

Methodology

The Camp2Congregation Project was established to investigate the question: *What are the impacts of Christian Traveling Day Camp programs on congregations, families, and young leaders in the church?* The project used an embedded mixed-methods research design, centering on SpringHill day camps, with supplemental and comparative data gathered from four Lutheran camping organizations with longer histories of traveling day camp. Researchers interviewed 20

congregational leaders who had hosted traveling day camps in summer 2018, selected using stratified random sampling of host sites. Codes and themes from these interviews contributed to the development of quantitative assessments for summer camp staff, camper parents, and congregational leaders, along with interview protocols for site visits. The perceived and desired impacts that the initial interviewees identified were tested in subsequent phases of the project. Researchers visited 16 day camp sites in summer 2019, gathering data from focus groups with campers, church workers, volunteers, and summer camp staff, along with audio/visual data and field notes. Each interviewee and focus group participant was able to define for themselves the impacts they observed or perceived. More than 500 summer camp staff from the 5 participating camps completed surveys, including more than 200 with matching surveys from the beginning and end of the summer. Over 400 parents affiliated with the 16 site visits completed a survey in late May and early June, including parents of children who did not attend day camp, providing a control group. Participating parents were given a follow-up survey in September 2019.

Findings

Traveling day camp is an outreach ministry that thrives as a partnership between the camp and congregation, functioning most effectively when well-trained summer staff facilitate participatory learning. Effective programs promote learning outcomes, enhance faith formation, and serve as doorways to ongoing programs in the camp and congregation.

Theme 1: *Programs were enhanced when partnership was prioritized.* Traveling day camp functioned as a hybrid of summer camp programming and congregational education programs (e.g. vacation Bible school). Programs relied on effective communication of expectations and coordination of various program elements. At sites where the transactional element of the partnership (e.g. money for services) was most emphasized, the perceived partnership was weakest, sometimes leading to confusion of expectations or a lack of enthusiasm for the program. Sites in which the camp and congregation had robust partnerships, usually including other camp programs and several years of working together, congregations had greater investment in the day camp and there was evidence for greater impacts. Effective partnership depended in large part on the camp's ability and willingness to adapt a high-quality, well-resourced camp program in response to contextual realities and the needs of the congregation.

Theme 2: *Traveling day camp is an outreach ministry.* The hybrid space of traveling day camp served as a *doorway* to the primary spaces of the congregation and the camp. Many congregational leaders hoped that day camp would bring new people from the community into the congregation, and camp leaders hoped that day camp would lead to participants registering for overnight camp. Both groups cited examples of success. Of surveyed parents whose children attended day camp, 6% said it was their family's first introduction to the congregation, while 25% said that day camp helped their child(ren) get more deeply involved in the congregation. Additionally, 25% said that their child(ren) attended or were planning to attend overnight camp, in part, because of positive day camp experiences. The outreach focus of traveling day camp also sought to include underserved young people and those who may not be able to attend overnight camp, due to such things as financial hardship, physical limitations, or parent apprehension about homesickness. As such, inclusion was a major theme at day camp, particularly for children with special needs.

Theme 3: *Effective traveling day camp relies on high-quality, well-trained summer camp staff.* The majority of the reflections about traveling day camp programs from both

congregational leaders and the campers centered on the quality of staff members. It was clear that the quality of staff was directly related to their level of training and the support they received from leadership. Three-quarters of summer staff indicated that after staff training, they felt prepared and empowered for their role during the summer. Those with less staff training (2-7 days) indicated feeling less prepared and empowered, on average, than those with 10-14 days of training. Training and supervisor support correlated with their performance. Camp staff that did not feel prepared or supported had a higher frequency of reported burnout or exhaustion at the end of the summer and had less of an understanding that their role fit in with the mission/vision of the camp. Camp staff who served on traveling day camp felt more supported by their supervisors, on average, than staff who served exclusively in on-camp programs, and they also reported a lower rate of exhaustion and burn-out.

Theme 4: *Learning at day camp is enhanced when experiences are meaningfully interpreted in the context of trusted relationships.* Programs focused on fun, kinesthetic experiences that were intentionally different from the children's normal routines and related to overnight camp experiences. The interpretation and processing of activities fell mainly to the summer camp staff members, who served as both relational mentors to participants and models for emulation. When the curriculum, theme, and message were well-incorporated into the activities, participants showed evidence for knowledge retention and growth in soft skills, such as self-confidence and social skills.

Theme 5: *Effective day camp enhances the faith formation journey in the congregation and the home.* Faith/spiritual formation was one of the major goals of the programs. Participants had opportunities to engage in Christian practices, such as worship and Bible study, and leaders worked to incorporate faith reflection into the fun, participatory activities. Impacts observed were directly related to and dependent upon the ministry of the congregation and/or the home. Most participants had active faith lives (94% of parents indicated that their family attended worship services monthly or more, including 61% attending weekly), so experiences served to augment these ministries and amplify faith in the child. When congregational and familial faith were not present, there was a hope among camp staff and church leadership that day camp might serve as a seed for a personal faith journey, which may grow in the near term or in the future.

Significance

Findings from the Camp2Congregation Project demonstrate how camp outcomes are enhanced when camps effectively partner with organizations that have year-round access to children. Through traveling day camp, camps were able to engage young people that they otherwise would not be able to access. There was evidence that this engagement increased the constituency of both the camp and partnership organization, enabling wider organizational reach. More importantly, the camps and partnership organizations shared common impact goals, and there is evidence that the partnership enhanced their impacts. While this study focused specifically on Christian camps, it has implications for other camps that partner with year-round organizations. Most significantly, the outcomes are enhanced when the partnership between the organizations is prioritized. As the relationship becomes more transactional (or an exchange for services), potential outcomes diminish.

This study also has important implications for summer camp staff. For camps that employ staff for a long summer season (6 or more weeks), a change of pace programmatically can reduce staff burnout. Camp staff who served some weeks in on-camp programs and other weeks in

traveling day camp reported getting more sleep, on average, and feeling less exhausted or burnt out at the end of the summer than those who spent the whole summer either on camp or on traveling day camp. Additionally, the length of staff training matters. Those with less than a week of staff training were less likely to feel prepared and empowered for their role during the summer than those with more training, and the impacts were clear during the site visits. Staff with less training were less effective in their role of supervising the children and running the programs.

References

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