Effective Camp Research Project, Phase 1: Narrative Summary

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Christian summer camp is a shockingly understudied field of ministry. Church professionals and camp directors frequently rely on anecdotal evidence to support their claims for its value, while scholars and researchers have largely ignored or dismissed its value for ministry. Claims abound that summer camp experiences are life-changing or transformative, though these are balanced with assertions that camp experiences are mere fun and games, theologically shallow, or fleeting. Discussions of summer camp are often characterized by misinformation, conflation of diverse camping ministry forms, and unsubstantiated claims. These factors present multiple challenges to an assessment of Christian summer camp. An adequate scholarly foundation has not been laid to support the diversity of claims related to camping ministry.¹ This project did not seek a comprehensive analysis of summer camp as a field of ministry, but rather an intimate and in-depth perspective of a particular form of camping ministry, in hopes of providing a firm foundation for future research. The findings provide evidence for a camp model, which consists of five fundamental characteristics and impacts participants in empirically recognizable ways.

Methodology

This research project used a grounded theory approach, which does not seek to test hypotheses but rather to generate new theories that are themselves grounded in the data. The

The research question was: What is the impact of the one-week summer camp experience on the lives of the primary participants and their supporting networks? Phase 1 of the study used a mixed-methods approach and focused on a cohort of three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) camps in Wisconsin: Lutherdale Bible Camp, Sugar Creek Bible Camp, and Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Bible Camp (known as “Wapo”). The typical summer camp program at all three sites involves small groups of 6 to 10 similarly-aged campers sleeping overnight in gendered housing for six days (Sunday through Friday) with a college-age staff member known as a counselor, who serves as the group guide and facilitator. The data cited below will include the camp’s name and one of the six qualitative data streams: campers (specified as girls or boys), staff members, supporting networks, camp directors, parents, and field notes. Focus groups were conducted on site with participants ages 11 to 14, summer staff members, and supporting network members (usually clergy) who accompanied the campers. Interviews were conducted with camp directors prior to the site visits. Data collectors gathered field notes about their experiences, observations, and reflections during a site visit lasting three days. Three members of the research team thematically coded these data for interrater reliability. Parents received electronic surveys two weeks after their children returned home, and the survey remained open until four weeks after the final camp session. A total of 386 surveys were completed. The survey included thirteen quantitative questions and four open-ended questions. Responses to the open-ended questions were coded and included in consideration of the emerging themes, while the quantitative questions were analyzed with descriptive statistics.

**Evidence for Positive Impact**

The major finding of this study is: The Christian summer camp experience directly impacted the participants in empirically recognizable ways, and these impacts extended to their supporting networks.

Positive impacts on campers were clear across all data streams and all three camps. Every focus group and interview included claims of the experience having substantial impacts on the participants. The specific impacts varied widely, which demonstrates the complexity of assessing the camp experience and the importance of considering the individuals’ specific contextual realities. In spite of the variability, it is clear that participants experienced real and identifiable impacts that they interpreted in overwhelmingly positive terms. These identifiable impacts are clustered around the five fundamental characteristics of the camp experience.
In many cases, the positive impacts exceeded the expectations of the participants and their supporting networks, especially parents. One parent expressed deep gratitude for the camp experience and remarked, “I have a different child after just one week of camp!” (Sugar Creek parents). Fully 94% of respondents to the parent survey rated their child’s camp experience at least an 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, and nearly half (48%) gave it a perfect 10 (defined as “superior experience”). It was enough for the vast majority of parents that their children were safe and happy. They regarded any positive changes as bonuses. The curious thing is that 92% of parents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “It is clear that camp had an impact on my child.” Their expectations seemed limited to fun and safety, but they witnessed positive impacts. Parents enumerated a variety of changes they saw in their children. Roughly half (48%) identified positive personality changes like increased self-confidence, happiness, and maturity, and about one-third (31%) noted positive changes in faith commitment, like more frequent religious practices, confidence discussing faith, and engagement in congregational ministries.

The primary expectation of the camp participants, like their parents, revolved around the idea that camp is supposed to be fun. The actual experience, while consistently described with terms like “fun” and “awesome,” went beyond simple enjoyment. Camp participants described growing in their faith and learning new things about themselves at camp. “You learn to be yourself,” one said (Wapo girls). They also described multiple skills and attitudes that they were convinced would continue affecting them long after returning home. One said, “We can take these skills we’ve learned and use them everywhere” (Sugar Creek girls).

Summer staff members, camp directors, and supporting networks were familiar with the potential impacts of the camp experience. They were not surprised to see recognizable changes because most of them had seen such changes before, and many had experienced personal changes through their own camp experiences. Their retrospective observations confirm the impacts that the participants and their parents were experiencing in real time. These impacts extended to the supporting networks both indirectly and directly. Indirect impacts included participants affecting those in their home contexts, for example, being more helpful around the house, being kinder to siblings, and encouraging their families to say grace before meals. Direct impacts involved adults who came to camp with participants and experienced such things as the joy of building relationships with young people or reported that the camp environment was personally renewing.
It is important to note that the positive impacts varied in degree and type among the participants. Some described changes as transformative or life-changing, while others were uncertain about the extent of the impacts or said that there were no changes. The data suggest that camp does not have a single determinative outcome but rather a set of potential impacts. It is misleading and erroneous to say that the camp experience causes change. The data show, rather, that the camp model, when faithfully practiced, opens the possibility for change in individuals and their supporting networks. These potential impacts are directly related to the five fundamental characteristics of the camp experience, which are enumerated below.

**Five Fundamental Characteristics of Christian Camp**

The data suggest that the positive impacts of camp result from a dynamic interplay of five characteristics that can be considered fundamental to the camp model of these three camps. This camp model may look and feel very different from camp to camp, from week to week at the same camp, and even from person to person within a single camp group. This reveals that the camp model is highly adaptive and contextual.

- Camp is relational.
- Camp is participatory.
- Camp is different from home.
- Camp is a safe space.
- Camp is faith-centered.

These five characteristics have no set order or direction of influence. They combine in a dynamic interplay that manifests differently in the varying contexts. For example, the relationships formed at camp may contribute to the feeling of emotional safety, but the feeling of safety may also open individuals to increased vulnerability that facilitates relationality. It is notable that a breakdown in one of the five characteristics seems to constitute a breakdown in the model itself, potentially leading to interpretation of the experience as negative or even harmful.

One parent who rated the overall experience a 5 out of 10 (one of only nine cases of a rating less than 7) explained, “She felt lost in the shuffle. No real bonds with people” (Wapo parent). This suggests that a breakdown in the characteristic *camp is relational* resulted in a breakdown of the model itself. Similar breakdowns were suggested with the other low ratings, with evidence for lack of engagement with activities (*camp is participatory*) and one case of safety concerns (*camp is a safe space*) constituting the breakdown. More research is needed to confirm this, since there
was not a large enough sample of participants with a poor experience in this study. Another response to the parent survey from Lake Wapogasset illustrates how the five fundamental characteristics work in tandem to positively impact a particular person:

*Her mom is going through a divorce. She was sad and anxious but wanted this camp experience. She made friends, learned how to pray, learned about faith and was uplifted and healed throughout the week. It was one of the best weeks of her life according to her: “I’m not depressed, my appetite is back, I believe I can make friends in a new school, I am closer to God.” This camp experience for her was the best!*

This camper had a positive and impactful experience, in part because of her difficult contextual realities. Simply getting away from home allowed her space to heal, and the participatory environment with new friends, faith practices, and emotional safety led to recognizable changes that put her on solid footing emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually. If one characteristic had broken down, the entire experience would have affected her differently.

*A Puzzle that Fits Perfectly*: *Camp is Relational*

A handful of visiting adults, mostly church workers from area congregations, stood watching the festivities and talking with each other. The Lutherdale dining hall had been transformed into a dance hall for the last night of camp, and nearly 100 campers were dancing, talking, and playing board games. Everyone was included and carrying on with some exuberance except for one young boy, who was sitting alone at a table. He was not a camp participant but rather had come with one of the visiting adults, so none of the campers knew him. He indicated to his parent that he was ready to leave. Then a young camper approached the table and challenged him to a game of checkers. The simple invitation led to over an hour of board games and conversation with a half dozen other campers. A child who felt out of place was invited into the community, and the boy’s parent expressed deep gratitude for the relational environment of Lutherdale.

Community building was clearly intentional at these camps, and people went out of their way to welcome others. One counselor explained, “It’s a true Christian community here. We all care about each other and we all love each other and we truly care about these kids that come here” (Lutherdale staff). The weekly camper groups became extensions of the close community
formed among the staff members. Parents expressed deep gratitude for counselors who connected with their children, and they described them as “mentors.” Fully 87% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that “My child met an adult role model.” Campers and staff members described the camp community in familial terms, with some referring to their cabin mates as siblings, and others describing camp as “a second home.” One camper said, “We have become like a big family and developed good friendships” (Sugar Creek girls). There was also a pervasive feeling among staff and campers that they fit in at camp. One camper explained, “We’re all so different, but we all came together and it was a puzzle that fit perfectly together. Like a 500-piece puzzle you just put together for the first time” (Lutherdale girls). Feelings of intimacy and acceptance were frequently contrasted with relationships outside of camp. One camper told his parents, “My friends at camp are so much nicer than my friends at school. They let me be myself” (Sugar Creek parents). This sentiment highlights how closely the theme of relationality is connected to the themes of safety and difference from home.

Responses to Parent Survey (N=373)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child met an adult role model.</td>
<td>10% 29% 58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child made friends.</td>
<td>6% 37% 54%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The camp community ate, slept, played, prayed, and worshiped together for days at a time. The progression from perfect strangers to close friends in a few days seems unlikely, but that is precisely what campers described. “You’re strangers. You don’t even know each other. And then, at the end of the week, you’re friends” (Lutherdale boys). Participants engaged in group-building activities that put them in challenging and often frustrating situations, which in turn built trust and care for one another. Every site visit had examples of campers involved in disagreements or conflicts, and several parents described instances when their children did not get along with other campers. In a small number of cases (9), parents characterized these disagreements as bullying, but the vast majority of campers had positive experiences working through disagreements and practicing forgiveness. Conflict became an opportunity to learn about
others and build stronger community. They held each other physically on the high and low ropes courses, and they held each other emotionally through intimate conversations and Bible studies. The results were that, by the end of the week, campers were accustomed to reaching out to one another and welcoming others. The camper at the Lutherdale dance treated the visiting boy not as a stranger or an outsider to the camp community, but rather as the missing piece of the communal puzzle.

This characteristic had clear impacts on the participants and their supporting networks. Many parents expressed that their children were simply kinder to others in the weeks following the camp experience, which affected all those around them. There was evidence of increased social competency, which parents expressed as their children being more “outgoing” or wanting to make new friends and interact with others rather than be at home alone. One camper said, “I think I’ll take away an outgoing personality and talk to people more. What I take away from camp is to go meet new people, make new friends” (Lutherdale boys). Campers learned how to approach new people, participate in group decision making, and work through disagreements. Many parents expressed that their children displayed increased confidence or self-esteem in the weeks following the camp experience. “She came home so upbeat, positive, and full of the love of Christ! She was the most confident I have seen her in a long time” (Sugar Creek parent). There is also evidence that the relational environment of camp helped cultivate positive attitudes toward other expressions of Christian community, particularly congregational ministries. “I’ve seen positive things since she has been home. She keeps reading the Bible, sees her friends that she has made at camp, along with the friends from church. She has been a leader and a helper at church” (Wapo parent). This is one of several parents who described that their children were engaging in congregational groups or forming friendships with other Christians in the weeks following camp.

“A Place to Move”: Camp is Participatory

A girls’ cabin group at Sugar Creek was looking forward to several novel activities, especially horseback riding and canoeing, but both were canceled due to poor weather. The cancellations did not ruin the experience, but rather opened opportunities to enhance the experience. Several of the girls described their favorite parts of the week as what they did instead of the planned activities. One explained, “Since most things got cancelled, we got to jump in puddles and have mud fights and mud baths. We pretended we were on a canoe trip, so we had
pretend canoes. We pretend we had seahorses, instead of horses” (Sugar Creek girls). They explained how they invented a game called “canoe baseball,” and they laughed about their memorable encounter with a nest of earwigs. Their experience illustrates adaptability, creative play with others through imaginary narratives, and joyful engagement with the natural world. A cancelled canoe trip meant more time for mud fights and a chance to invent new games.

Responses to Parent Survey (N=375)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My child tried something new.</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My child had fun at camp.</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9%</td>
<td>88%</td>
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The camp model at these sites facilitated kinesthetic, multi-sensory activities, which provided opportunities for campers to play, learn, grow, and engage those around them in unique ways. Fully 87% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child tried something new while at camp. The wide variety of activities included such things as field games, high and low ropes courses, swimming, hiking, canoeing, and creek stomping. They also played novel games like gaga ball and nine square in the air. “They have something for everybody,” one camper insisted. “If you like to dance, they have a dance devo. If you like to sing, they’re always singing” (Wapo girls). The data make clear that these activities were youth-focused and youth-approved. The campers had a strong sense that the activities were for them and their peers, in contrast to other contexts like church, where they felt things were geared towards adults. “It’s the best way for kids,” one camper said of the active learning, “because a lot of adults probably wouldn’t like the way that they teach things, like the goofy songs and all that, but it’s perfect for our age” (Lutherdale boys). Campers were encouraged to try new things, problem solve, and take risks in a setting that was intentionally safe. Many campers interpreted the experiences as “fun.” One explained, “We play so many games…you’re pretty much having fun most of the time” (Wapo boys). Parents overwhelmingly reported that their children had fun at camp (97% moderately or strongly agreed). It is clear that there was more going on than simple enjoyment. The fun experiences had didactic functions: fostering connections to faith formation, promoting
cooperation, and encouraging personal development. “They’re teaching us things without us really knowing that we’re being taught,” one camper reflected, adding, “There’s always a point to the games” (Sugar Creek girls). The young participants were learning through doing, making the fun or goofy activities quite serious in their impact upon campers. One visiting parent remarked, “It’s the only place my kid can move!” (Wapo field notes). The active, participatory, educational environment of camp is often in sharp contrast to a school classroom or a worship service, which generally emphasizes being still and receiving information passively.

The natural settings of the camps helped to facilitate the highly participatory environments. One visiting church worker said, “I love being outside with them. We don't have a whole lot of land around our congregation at all, or in the city. To be able to run with the kids and experience God in a new way and in a new setting-- with the open air, and the open space, and the trees, and water-- is really, really wonderful” (Lutherdale supporting network). Campers experienced a sense of awe or wonder in creation. One camper described her experience of sleeping outside for the first time, “It was amazing to look at the stars and see the moon and know that God created everything and God created all the beauty” (Sugar Creek girls). Campers also engaged in faith-centered activities that were facilitated in non-traditional ways. They relished the ability to move, dance, and participate in leadership of worship services. As one boy said, “It makes you feel like you’re actually a part of it” (Sugar Creek boys). His cabin mate chimed in, “When I’m looking around at church, all the kids are just kind of sitting there. Some of them are actually sleeping because it’s really boring…Here, it’s hard to sleep because we just want to keep going and going and going. That’s basically what worship is” (Sugar Creek boys). Campers worshiped around campfire circles, in swimming pools, under the stars, in the woods, and atop the climbing tower at Lutherdale. Such settings engaged multiple senses and provided opportunities for serenity, connections to nature, and participatory worship experiences.

The potential impacts of this characteristic that manifest themselves in the data include willingness to try new things, increased creativity, and more positive attitudes toward life. The Sugar Creek girls did not skulk when their much-anticipated activities were cancelled. They demonstrated tremendous creativity and resilience in adapting to frustrating circumstances in positive ways. Many of the respondents to the parent survey confirmed that the creativity and positive attitudes continued in the weeks following camp. One responded to a question about changes in her child with, “Full of life and energy and hope for the future” (Wapo parent).
data suggest that the participatory activities helped campers develop problem-solving skills, social connection, and increased understanding of Christian teachings. Camp provides space, time and opportunity for unique activities, which open participants to multiple forms of growth and continue affecting them after returning from camp.

“Away from your Life”: Camp is Different from Home

The young boy sat perfectly still and silent for an hour, determined to take the experience seriously. He was not being punished or left out, but rather participating in an activity at Sugar Creek known as *sacred silence*. His entire cabin group was spread out in solitary silence, and they later reflected together on the uniqueness of this activity. One explained, “We were completely silent and we just kind of prayed and did quiet stuff for an entire hour. I don't do that at my house.” They were in wonder not only that they could do something like this, but that they actually enjoyed and appreciated this sacred time. The camper who had remained completely still looked around as his cabin mates described their experiences. Realization dawned that the activity only involved remaining silent, not remaining still. “What?” came his indignant reply to the knowledge that he had gone above and beyond the already challenging requirement. “An hour long, I was sitting there!” The group shared a laugh and continued processing their experience.

### Responses to Parent Survey (N=350)

![Bar chart showing responses to parent survey](chart.png)

- **My child learned something new:**
  - **Disagree:** 9%
  - **Neither agree nor disagree:** 42%
  - **Somewhat agree:** 47%
  - **Strongly agree:**

Study participants repeatedly reported their perceptions that camp was a unique, set apart place with significant differences from their home contexts. A large majority of respondents to the parent survey (89%) agreed that their child learned something new at camp. Spending time in what some described as a “space away” allowed for deep reflection on the differences between camp and other contexts such as home, church, school, and “the outside world” (Wapo staff) in general. “I feel like people don’t really end up getting away from everything that they’re comfortable with,” one camper began, as her cabin mates encouraged her: “Preach!” She
continued, “Once you actually get away from your life, you can see a whole different angle, and it can be a lot more fun and exciting” (Lutherdale girls). The physical separation provided perspective on life. Homesickness was not a major theme in the data, but some participants described missing parents, pets, and other things about their home contexts. There is evidence that working through feelings of homesickness contributed to resilience and feelings of independence. One parent said, “[She] missed home a bit, but she overcame that” (Wapo parent). Some participants alluded to conflict in their home contexts, and they contrasted this with the “peaceful” environment of camp. “Not a lot of people fight. It’s a very enjoyable place,” one boy explained (Wapo boys). The differences from home are, in some cases, closely connected to the theme of *camp is safe.*

Participants especially emphasized the absence of technology as a distinct feature of camp, including social media, cell phones, television, and video games. The surprise was that their assessment of time away from technology was overwhelmingly positive. One camper reflected, “I think I have a little bit of an addiction to my technology. But here… I don’t want to use it, because I get to do so many other things” (Lutherdale boys). Another said, “If you look around you in the city, you’ll see a bunch of people walking really fast, talking on their phone… you don’t really see people just stopping and looking around at the world, and camp has given us a chance to do that” (Lutherdale girls). Some parents even noted a decrease in dependence on electronics after campers returned home. “She seemed less dependent on electronics, and we liked that!” (Lutherdale parent). Campers and staff utilized the natural and outdoor elements uniquely present in camp settings as one way to fill the gap left by technology’s absence. One counselor said, “With the nature part of it, kids get away, they leave their cell phones, they get out into the woods or on the river and experience God's creation firsthand” (Sugar Creek staff). This counselor’s description includes several of the fundamental characteristics of the camp model (*different from home*, participatory, and *faith-centered*), illustrating how these themes are intertwined.

The potential impacts of this characteristic that manifest themselves in the data include increased independence and differentiation from parents and peers. “There is an independence gained from being away from your home for a whole week,” one parent observed (Sugar Creek parents). Many other parents also noted increased maturity or independence in their children. This differentiation and resulting self-confidence seemed to stem, in part, from the participants’
understanding that their opinions and contributions were valued at camp. As one put it, “You get treated like a person rather than like a little kid” (Wapo girls). Camp provided them physical separation from the priorities and expectations of parents and peer groups, which offered participants opportunities to safely engage in independent decision making in a supportive environment. One camper explained, “I feel like the counselors help us grow in our faith with Jesus. Even though they help us with that, I feel like we take on our own responsibility, too. We can grow in our faith on our own, independently” (Sugar Creek girls). The supportive and relational environment of camp provided a safe space to explore questions of personal identity and opportunities to internalize or take ownership of the Christian faith.

“No one will Judge You”: Camp is a Safe Space

“Spotters ready?” The cable was only a foot off the ground, so a fall was unlikely to result in serious injury, but there was more at stake here than a bruised shin or a dirty backside. The girls were on the low ropes challenge course at Sugar Creek, and several had already traversed this particular obstacle, with cabin mates in the prescribed spotter position on either side of the rather wobbly cable. She had a choice of whether or not to participate. Many participants opted out of various challenge activities, since they were challenge by choice. This time, she had decided to do it. “Ready!” her cabin mates responded with a determined confidence that she did not feel. But her cabin mates would not know this until later when they sat together with a researcher, who asked them what it feels like to be at camp. “When I got here,” she began, “I was afraid people were going to shun me out and I was going to be an outcast. I'm not really into teamwork. I like to do things by myself, independently. But with the low ropes, [my counselor] helped me learn how to work with the team a lot better, and it's so fun” (Sugar Creek girls). Her story and confession to her cabin mates illustrate how camps create spaces of physical and emotional safety for their campers.

Respondents to the parent survey agreed overwhelmingly that their children’s physical needs were taken care of at camp (94% somewhat or strongly agreed). The site visits confirmed that safety was a top priority of all three camps, from the diligent safety measures on the challenge courses and constant camper supervision to careful food preparation and routine facility maintenance. The young girl’s experience on the low ropes course demonstrates that the theme of safety encompasses much more than physical safety. Participants described camp as a place where they could share their authentic selves without fear of judgment or bullying. “I feel
like no one will judge you because of what you believe here. That’s why I like it” (Wapo boys). Parents overwhelmingly disagreed that their child was looked down on or made fun of at camp (88% somewhat or strongly disagreed). Campers contrasted the feeling of safety at camp with contexts such as home or school, where they felt fear of being “judged,” a word that campers at all three sites used for exclusion or ridicule experienced away from camp. Campers credited their counselors with actively creating a sense of emotional safety, and staff members described taking intentional steps to make campers feel loved and accepted. Parents confirmed the impact of these intentional actions, describing their children’s experiences of “feeling safe” (Wapo parent), “feeling loved,” and feeling like they “fit in” (Sugar Creek parents) at camp. One camper put it succinctly: “The whole camp is like a huge safe zone” (Wapo girls).

Responses to Parent Survey (N=373)

The sense of belonging and feelings of profound safety helped strengthen the feeling of camp is relational and allowed campers to focus on other aspects of camp, particularly that camp is faith-centered. One camper poignantly said, “You can focus on God, not what you’re going to wear tomorrow” (Wapo girls). She and her cabin mates felt free to be themselves in ways that they seldom found possible away from camp. Several campers admitted that they did not feel safe praying or expressing their faith in other contexts, so camp became a safe place to explore their faith. One camper said he felt like he had to pray behind closed doors at home because a sibling was an atheist (Lutherdale boys). Another said of camp, “You can openly talk about your faith. You don’t have to not say anything. You can talk and ask questions” (Wapo girls). Camper groups trusted one another with their physical, emotional, and spiritual safety. Participants at all three camps felt safe to take risks and step outside of their comfort zones. These risks included such things as participation in the high ropes courses (Lutherdale and Wapo), sharing a talent for
the first time in front of a large group (Lutherdale), and praying out loud for the first time (all three sites).

The potential impacts of this characteristic include more positive self-understanding, increased self-esteem, and a desire to seek safe places and relationships. Multiple focus group participants were able to verbalize that a more authentic version of themselves emerged while at camp, indicating an acute understanding of this positive impact of self-understanding. Participants described a sense of authenticity contributing to greater self-esteem, and staff members described intentionally cultivating feelings of self-worth in their campers. More than 80% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child grew in self-confidence, and this was one of the most commonly described impacts in their open-ended responses. One said, “He has been more self-confident and wants to be more in charge of himself” (Lutherdale parent). There is also evidence that participants who experience camp as a safe space with beneficial outcomes to their well-being leave with a desire to identify and seek out such safe spaces and relationships in the future. Several staff members, for example, described the deep sense of belonging they felt in the camp community and their efforts to find healthy and safe communities away from camp, particularly at their colleges or universities.

“Another Mile in the Race of Faith”: Camp is Faith-Centered

Music filled the space again, as scores of Camp Wapo participants looked on, fully engaged in the experience. The crisp notes of an electric guitar played, as a counselor opened the Bible and began to read from the gospels. The images were becoming much clearer now. The painter at the easel on the left was forming an image of the crucifixion with broad, sweeping strokes, while the painter on the right was confidently forming a scene of the empty tomb. The camp community had joined in several of the songs, while they listened to others. Music had included guitars, drums, a cappella singing, a trumpet, a harmonica, and a recorded song played over the sound system. A graceful dancer emerged and danced to one of the contemporary Christian songs. The last few brush strokes illuminated a bright light around Jesus and the empty tomb – the pinnacle of the painting. The two painters, who were father and daughter, briefly described the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They closed by explaining how everyone in the room was part of this story.

Christian faith was a way of life at these three camps. One camper said, “It’s part of my daily routine now” (Wapo boys). This daily routine was structured with Christian devotional
practices first thing in the morning and just before falling asleep. Each day also included a Christian education time focused on Bible study and at least one worship service. The worship described above was but one in a wide variety of worship experiences that were participatory and engaging. One camper said, “At home, you basically only go to church once a week. Here, you’re constantly learning about God” (Sugar Creek girls). Her reflection highlights that faith formative conversations and activities were integrated into virtually all aspects of camp life. A camper explains, “No matter what we’re doing, they intertwine the Christian stuff into it. When we were canoeing, it was about God’s water. Same with the swimming. When we’re doing the high ropes, it’s our trust that God won’t let us fall and our teammates won’t let us fall. Wherever we go, we try to see God in whatever we’re doing” (Lutherdale girls). Campers consistently reported enjoying the faith immersion of the camp experience and demonstrated increased levels of curiosity, understanding, and feelings of safety to ask questions. Focus group members spoke enthusiastically about faith expressions, and several broke into songs that connected to scripture or the daily theme (for example, the Wapo boys spontaneously sang a song based on the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23). A boy at Sugar Creek expressed his deepening interest in reading the Bible, sharing that his current favorite passage was the bizarre episode in 2 Kings 2:23-24. “Usually, the Bible doesn't really talk about she-bears mauling people,” he explained (Sugar Creek boys). This camper quoting the Bible, book and verse, provides evidence that campers are met where they are in their faith formation. Others went beyond the silly or bizarre by explaining the significance of their camp experience through reference to scripture. One boy expressed his conviction that God does not give up on his atheist friend by citing the story of Jonah: “The Ninevites were spared, even though they did all those bad things” (Lutherdale boys). Connections between faith practices and life situations were becoming natural to these campers.

Responses to Parent Survey (N=373)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important to me that Christian beliefs and practices are emphasized at this camp.</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child grew in his or her faith.</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Counselors, in particular, were credited with fostering faith formation, especially the integration of faith into daily life. A visiting church worker described the counselors’ actions and faith practices as “living it out” (Wapo supporting network), something that inspired the campers and modeled the faith for them. A parent commented, “She really liked her counselor this year and especially enjoyed the Bible studies with her. The counselor was able to relate the stories to her personal life showing the kids how these age-old stories transcend into modern day life” (Wapo parent). This demonstrates that campers were incorporating faith into their lives, both at camp and at home. Faith at camp is not a general spirituality, but rather is particular, as all three camps use ELCA doctrine as part of their identity and mission. This helped the campers connect faith at camp with faith in their home contexts. “I feel as though praising God isn’t a thing that I hate doing anymore. It’s a lot more fun. I haven’t been doing it, really going to church. I see why we do it now” (Sugar Creek boys). This young boy is one of many participants who indicated that the camp experience helped them see the importance of faith practices in the home.

Campers, parents, staff members, and supporting networks all indicated that the camp experience has significant positive impacts on the faith of participants. Fully 90% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “My child grew in his or her faith.” Parents also indicated increases in specific faith practices, especially Bible reading, prayer, church attendance, and willingness to talk about their faith. They supplied evidence that these changes impacted the supporting networks, since several families began saying grace before meals or having faith discussions with their children. Campers reported that opportunities to be curious about Christianity increased understanding and faith. One said, “[Camp] strengthens my faith. Whenever I come here, all of the teachings restore my faith to a really high level” (Lutherdale boys). Another said, “Each time you go to camp, you run another mile in your race of faith” (Wapo girls). This impact on faith is also described as deeper and longer lasting than the week of camp. One camper said, “Even into the next three or four months after I’ve been to Sugar Creek, I think about God a lot more” (Sugar Creek boys). The impact on the faith lives of campers appears to be widely experienced and ongoing.

Evidence of Long-Term Impact

One of the most encouraging findings of this research is that there is evidence for ongoing impact beyond the one-week camp experience. A few parents and participants indicated that impacts were “short-lived” (Sugar Creek parent) or that they faded over time, but there were...
more frequent indications that the impacts associated with the camp experience lasted for months or years after returning home. Sometimes, this ongoing connection was expressed through campers growing up to become counselors. One explained, “It's been a while since I've been a camper, but I felt like I kind of lost my faith. I felt like if I was able to get back here, where I felt most confident when I was a kid, then I could teach them and help them grow in their faith. It will, in turn, help me because I'm helping others” (Lutherdale staff). This participant recalled the feelings of emotional safety and faith-centeredness from his childhood camp experiences and was able to return in hopes of passing these feelings on to new campers. This type of long-term relationship with camp, while it manifests differently for different people, is a major finding of this study.

Responses to Parent Survey (N=371)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is clear that camp had an impact on my child.</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to send my child to this camp in the future.</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The camp experience is often cyclical, in that it produces intense loyalty and a desire to return. Many parents and supporting network members reported going to camp as children or working at camp, and all three camp directors had significant personal experiences as campers and staff members. Parent survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that camp impacted their children (92%) and that they planned to send them in the future (93%). There were few cases of overall negative experiences, but even many of these parents indicated confidence in the camp model and a desire to send their children in subsequent years. Parents who reported that their children got lice, suffered injury (including broken bones), or did not have much fun still rated the overall experience highly (an 8 or 9 out of 10) and indicated their intention to return. These parents displayed an almost unshakeable confidence in the camp experience. Campers indicated their wishes to come back in future summers, and many were already returning campers. They also expressed excitement to experience camp outside of the traditional summer camp paradigm, such as retreats during the school year (Lutherdale boys). Participants expressed interest in becoming counselors, and counselors recalled impactful camp experiences as critical to their
reasons for being on summer camp staff. There is a clear desire on the part of many participants to remain connected to camp in some capacity, no matter their life stage.

The camp faithful have strong buy-in to the camp model and are convinced of its value. There is a feeling that everyone should experience camp, yet there is also a preference for the specific way in which an individual experienced the camp model. This can lead to a narrow view of what qualifies as camp rather than the adaptive view of the five fundamental characteristics detailed in this study. The variability in the schedules, activities, and site specifics among the three camps demonstrates that different camps can achieve similar impacts and cultivate camp loyalty, as long as the fundamental characteristics are in place. The intense loyalty also indicates that the camp experience functions for some as their primary locus of faith formation, though there is very little evidence that this results in rejection of other faith communities. On the contrary, there is strong evidence that participants become more engaged in faith communities following the camp experience.

**Conclusion**

This study used a grounded theory approach to explore the impact of the one-week Christian summer camp experience on the primary participants and their supporting networks. The data reveal that there are direct and empirically recognizable impacts of the camp experience. There is also compelling evidence that these impacts continue to affect participants and, by extension, their supporting networks long after the camp experience is completed. The specific impacts are clustered under five characteristics that the data suggest are fundamental to the camp experience: camp is relational, participatory, different from home, a safe space, and faith-centered. Together, these characteristics constitute what the researchers have called the camp model. The data indicate that camp supporters, particularly parents and church workers who have experienced the impact of camp, are largely responsible for perpetuating the camp model as a form of ministry and education. This model appears in highly contextualized forms at various camp sites, where the details may look and feel vastly different from one another. Some supporters believe that the details make the model itself successful, but the data indicate that the five fundamental characteristics may be expressed in multiple ways and have remarkably similar impacts. The data suggest that the five fundamental characteristics are interrelated and dependent on one another. There were simply not enough poor experiences in this data set to confirm the specifics of a breakdown in the model, but a few cases suggest that a breakdown occurs when
any one of the five fundamental characteristics is absent. It is estimated that a sample size in excess of 1,000 participants is necessary to test this hypothesis. This estimate and the finding that the impacts are empirically recognizable warrant a quantitative follow-up study of camp participants. With evidence for positive, long-term impacts on camp participants, camp is clearly much more than a place for parents to leave children for a week in the summer, and it goes far beyond fun and games. More evidence is needed to confirm the validity of the camp model and assess the specific ongoing impacts on participants, but this project has laid a firm foundation for future research.

*The following organizations participated in the Effective Camp Research Project:*

![Lutherdale Ministries](image1)

![Sugar Creek Bible Camp](image2)

![Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Bible Camp](image3)

*Thank you to our generous donors and sponsors!*

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Penny Christenson: Lutheran Outdoor Ministries in Ohio
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