



Partners in Ministry:

United Church Outdoor Ministries and Communities of Faith



The United Church of Canada
L'Église Unie du Canada

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United Church Outdoor Ministries and Communities of Faith

Partners in Ministry contains three pieces excerpted from the larger 2009 resource *We Are Camp! United Church Camps and Congregations—Partners in Ministry*, a resource that accompanied the United Church campaign of the same name. The purpose of the *We Are Camp!* campaign was to support United Church camps as they worked to raise awareness in their local communities that camping is

- an integral ministry for young people
- an active and growing outreach ministry of the church
- a way to strengthen and renew the church’s ministry to children, young teens, and youth

The key message of *We Are Camp!* (and this 2020 reworking, *Partners in Ministry*) is that curating intentional links between outdoor ministries/camps and faith communities benefit the ministries of all.

For more information, visit the United Church website (www.united-church.ca) and search for “children youth.”



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Design: Carina Cruz Domingues, Graphics and Print

Leadership Development at Camp

by Maya Landell and Bill Stevens

Maya Landell learned what it meant to be a leader as a camp counsellor at Pearce-Williams United Church Christian Centre the summer after Grade 9. She spent the next decade immersed in leadership development and opportunities to grow as a youth and young adult at camp. Now, 30 years later, the full significance of that experience is still being revealed. Maya is currently an ordained minister serving in congregational ministry in Toronto, and her camping background is one of the key building blocks of her leadership in ministry.

As a youth leader at camp, Maya had responsibilities for the health and safety, spiritual care, overall well-being, and fun of six to eight campers, 24 hours a day. She was the person they listened to and trusted while they were away from home. Looking back, Maya is more aware of the importance of this role in the life of the campers, some of whom she still corresponds with. She also sees the impact her camp leadership training had on her own sense of self and her faith development.

Bill Stevens' first summer at camp was in 1978 as an adult at Camp Kee-Mo-Kee. At camp he found himself awakened to the feeling of being spiritually alive. During that experience of seeing God's children—young and old—in God's world, he found himself drawn deeper to camping ministry. Called by a strong sense of urgency that this is what he should be doing, he served as Director of Camp Big Canoe from 1998 to 2018. After retiring, Bill began volunteering at Pearce Williams, where he cuts grass and does small improvement projects around the centre. Bill continues to find his faith as well as his personal, spiritual, and emotional growth encouraged and supported in camping ministry.

Both Bill and Maya know from experience that camp is a testing ground for leadership development. As Counsellors-in-Training (CIT) or Leaders-in-Training (LIT), and later as camp staff, the value of camp leadership training becomes apparent as young people acquire a set of transferable leadership and life skills that are valuable, regardless of their chosen profession.

- *Music and drama leadership:* unaccompanied and on demand
- *Christian leadership:* connecting to the Creator through the beautiful spaces of camp, and the freedom to share our own experiences and questions about God (especially under the stars)
- *Creative leadership:* the freedom to think outside the box and make crazy ideas come to life, whether in theme dinners, all-camp activities, or Bible adventures in chapel
- *Prayerful leadership:* starting the day with devotions as a staff group, and ending with camp vespers and cabin prayers teaches that everyone has a voice to use for praying and giving thanks
- *Humble leadership:* taking servant-leadership to heart by doing dishes, late-night kitchen mopping, plunging toilets, or taking care of sick ones; becoming less selfish and learning that you are not the centre of the universe
- *Respectful leadership:* children and youth already know a lot about God and faith—at camp there is a chance to learn as much from them as they learn from us
- *Community leadership:* living and leading together as a team, working out what it means to share space, be in healthy relationship, and respect and care for each other no matter how different we are
- *Program flexibility:* the ability to adapt as a leader depending on the weather or needs of the campers—putting campers first over “the plan”
- *Meaningful problem-solving and decision-making:* whether helping a group of kids or another staff person, or tackling the task at hand, staff collaborate daily in decisions that impact individual campers and the organization
- *Listening to and learning from feedback:* experiencing (possibly for the first time) a Performance Evaluation Process—by using this tool as an exercise for growth rather than only a way to redirect and praise, both camp and staff benefit

- *Dealing with conflict*: one of the best life skills youth learn at camp, from three perspectives: receiving feedback from supervisors to resolve an issue, confronting others when needed, or mediating a resolution of issues between others
- *Discipline*: the skill of showing up and performing well every day
- *Mentoring*: learning from those who have been leading for a longer time, and who are willing to work with you as you learn to lead
- *Grace*: there's always next week—even when situations are challenging you always get a chance to try again

It is hard to put into words the true value of these leadership opportunities for youth and young adults. In a world that tells us our worth by how many educational degrees we have and how much money we make, camp is countercultural. Leaders choose to lead at camp, not for the hours, money, or prestige, but because the things they learn and experience at camp cannot be bought. They hear a call to continue their faith and vocational journey in that place—whether it is for one summer or many summers—and they are changed.

As we look to the future of leadership in our world and in our church, it is imperative that we see our camps as training grounds for leadership. Leadership development is happening at United Church Camps. Strengthening the ties will allow this leadership to continue throughout the year. The possibilities for engaging trained, skilled, and passionate youth and young adults in our faith communities are endless if we as congregations begin to do our work to include and make room for them to lead. Now is the time—let us be generous in our support and big in our dreaming about how this leadership development can be a source of joy for all.

In conclusion, we invite you to look around and ask people to share their own stories of call and connection to ministry with children and youth through camping. Current leaders have often had a profound, life-changing, spiritual experience at camp that is part of their faith journey to the place where they are leading now (inside or outside this United Church of ours). Let's not be afraid to celebrate it, talk about it, and foster these experiences for the leaders of today and tomorrow.

Be Careful or the “Camp People” Will Get You!

by Jeanie Oulton

It was a half-time position and a full-time commitment to a small congregation in Trenton, Ontario. North Trenton United (now part of Trenton United Church, amalgamated in 2015) began their story on the streets of their own town. Folk, who would have travelled to church, observed that children had no place to go Sunday mornings and were out on the streets. From their beginnings, this congregation desired to make a place for children. They started a Sunday school. They never aspired to be a big church, or a well-to-do church, just a place where the young could be taught the Christian faith.

Small communities understand the limited-hands economy of parish life. Folk wear many hats and some become known as the “go-to people” for certain things. Camp Quin-Mo-Lac has had the good fortune and blessed wisdom to tuck powerful weapons of persuasion within United Church congregations. While I was at North Trenton, one such lady started in a quiet, seemingly innocent way to ask about my family’s experience of camp. Had I considered going to camp?—they really need chaplains. She started in early fall and then sent another volley a month later. That day she repeated the concern “they really need chaplains, you know”.... She waited till after Christmas before circling me again, taking full aim where I live. This time she said, “I was just thinking about your children.”

Mary Gilchrist can sell Teflon to T-Fal—because she lives her commitments. She served her church and Camp Quin-Mo-Lac in many ways. Put these two forces together, Mary and North Trenton, tie them to a mutual resolve that camp ministry is of monumental importance, and you get a perfect passion for ministry. In all honesty we went that first time because Mary was persistent, and we thought the children ought to go. We felt unprepared and not very kidwise. Having children does not make you an expert on all children, let alone the Christian development of young hearts.

We have learned a lot at camp. Camp life is exhausting and exhilarating at the same time. It is kid-over-the-top intense, every cell of your being meaningful and purpose filled. You sing, laugh, listen to stories, and sit in youthful circles to witness serendipitous coming-of-age moments.

At the end of my first group session I asked, “What would you like to pray about today?” I listened to wee, small Bears pray about big stuff. (Camp Quin-Mo-Lac’s cabins are divided into age groups named after woodland creatures—Bears are the youngest.) They prayed about mom and dad and what was not right at home, the world and bombs, nature and all that is hurting in their universe, the cat they were sure missed them, the neighbour who had died, the grandmother who was sick. I said “amen” and scrambled to find words to say how great God is and that you don’t have to carry heavy burdens alone. While I was trying to fix this moment, the kids moved on ahead of me. I looked around at kids wiggling, tugging at each other, whispering, giggling, being kids. These young theologians knew intuitively about this great God. To be able to share what was important to them was medicinal and enough. I learned that day that an adult can take the faith out of faith with a hint of her own doubt.

I realized then and there that I, too, was a camper and learning about God. At camp I have been privileged to watch little Bears grow 10 feet tall, and I have seen Ravens and Wolves with shaky self images step out and discover the joy being who they are. I have listened to heroic stories of perseverance through tough times as Foxes and Caribou shared experiences of school days and what it feels like to be bullied and have no one there to help you.

So what do children find at camp? Camp Quin-Mo-Lac models Christian community where all are accepted. The past isn’t allowed to own the present or rob a child of laughter and joy. When you cross the threshold of camp you get to leave the stuff that is not so good behind. You don’t have to worry about being bullied because that is not allowed.

You are not called names or excluded. You have cabinmates who become your new buddies. You don't have to hold up the world. God does that. This community wants you and will accept you. This is a place that teaches that things are possible and joy is unreserved. Each individual is treated as special and difficult individuals are treated as special with value added. You are not treated as flawed if you have ADHD or ADD, are hyperactive or youthfully mischievous, young or old, a bad singer, or have learning or behavioural issues. Life may have challenges, but then there is a reason for rock wall climbing, high ropes, and early-morning polar bear swims, treks into the forest, and many other group activities.

Children learn about faith. They learn that they can overcome great obstacles and that it is good to be part of a Christian community where you give and receive help. No one is left behind or to face great challenges alone. A little Bear who worries that mom and dad don't get along learns that she doesn't have to fix it and that her feelings matter. She learns that God can help people to make it through awful times and that it is okay to belly laugh even when you just a moment ago felt sad inside. Every child should go to camp. There are a lot of days when I see the hurt of the world at my doorstep and I think every adult should go, too.

Thank you to Mary and to the congregation that never once complained or questioned my request to take a week from my pastoral responsibilities to go to camp. In fact, they stepped up and arranged for someone to cover my duties. At session or board meetings they conveyed their support. I always felt like it was their way of going to camp, too.

If your congregation has not considered the importance of supporting camp, now is the time. Be a community that instills in young hearts love, courage, and faith. You will never really know how much good work your support can accomplish. That's the beauty of this whole thing. God will work through you to touch individual lives in ways that change their world and maybe even the world.

Encourage and help pay for camp. If the other camps are like Quin-Mo-Lac, the programming, the environment, the weeks of cultivating Christian leaders through counsellor training are done really well and with a gifted director and leadership staff at the helm. There is nothing second-rate here. You give your best to God. The fee can be a lot for families. Some will need your help. I can't think of anything else where the return so outweighs the initial investment.

If you are wondering where to start, listen to the camp people. They have a real story worth hearing. Help them help you to help your congregation care about this work. I am forever changed by my experience. I did not start out a camp enthusiast—my mantra would have been “I am not a camp person”—but alas here I am. Let me know what else I could say or do to persuade you. And a note of warning out of my own experience—don't just be wary of the camp people, *pray that they find you!*

Chaplaincy at a United Church Camp

by Matthew Stevens

Where can you go to apprehend a genuine encounter with Creator? In a very real sense, that's a dilemma that everyone involved in congregational ministry wrestles with on a routine basis. As clergy we constantly seek to find the right liturgical balance of inspirational phraseology and reflective silence, emotive music and thought-provoking prose, pastoral presence and inclusive participation. Sometimes we actually get it right (either because of or in spite of our best efforts), and although the experience often leaves us drained of energy, those are the times when we're truly glad we accepted this calling.

But on all those other occasions, where can you go to apprehend a genuine encounter with Creator? It's certainly no secret that ministry continues to evidence an alarmingly high burnout rate, and that many clergy routinely struggle with an all-but-overwhelming sense of spiritual disconnectedness. After all of the pastoral care and faith formation exertions they lavish upon their parishioners, when ministers finally seek their own spiritual refreshment and nurturing, it's not uncommon for them to discover that the well has gone dry. Those are the times when we feel hopelessly inadequate to the call we've accepted.

So again, where can you go to apprehend a genuine encounter with Creator? Very little within our years of theological college training provides us with much in the way of practical guidance in opening ourselves to such an intimate encounter. The vast majority of our learning is far too cerebral and esoteric for the down-to-earth circumstances in which we presently find ourselves. We might turn to a spiritual adviser at such a time, or resolve to re-acquaint ourselves with the discipline of directed meditation, but even these potentially curative practices seem distant to our current reality.

Perhaps now we are at last properly conditioned to rediscover an eternal truth. Creator's presence is all about us! Now, that's undoubtedly true, but right at the moment it may be a bit difficult for us to actually observe. We desperately need to refocus from the

myopia that day-to-day ministry has gradually imposed upon us, to regain a dynamic vision of Creator at work and at play in nature. Even as a child enthusiastically explores each new venue and enters each novel adventure with sincere and open curiosity, we, too, must grant ourselves permission to set aside all the cynically sophisticated analysis of adulthood, and live into life.

This is the opportunity that awaits clergy who volunteer for chaplaincy in a United Church Camp. Being privy to the magical moment when a young city-dweller discovers one of the wonders of nature is a rare experience that will renew even the most calloused heart. Seated in a circle on a summer meadow, freed from the stifling conventions of liturgy and atrophied ritual, the most wearied clergy will learn anew the genuine depth of spirituality that is inherent to the youngest child. Looking across the glowing embers of the evening campfire into the silhouetted faces of children, we're keenly aware of the sheer joy of living.

Where can you go to apprehend a genuine encounter with Creator? Well, a week or two at a United Church summer camp can be a pretty good place to make a start, and may very well become a regular part of your own spiritual journey.