



# Beyond Camp-As-Usual

## Sticky Faith Approaches to More Intentional Camps and Retreats

By Mindy Coates Smith

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The bus is six hours late.

The boys' cabin got into a fistfight.

Volunteer leaders are tired and cranky.

The youth camp experience can be exhausting. It is almost comical that we call these weekends and weeks away "retreats," as all too often the camp schedule is severely hurried and frenzied.

Many times over the past several years, the youth team I am part of has asked ourselves whether going to camp is worth it, especially considering the staggering resources we invest in the camp experience. The administration of camp paperwork, recruiting and training volunteers to attend camp, not to mention the significant loss to our youth budget are just a few factors that make camp less appealing.

Yet every time we have seriously discussed whether or not we should continue going to camp, we always decide with enthusiasm that *yes, camp is worth it.*

### Why Camp?

The question then becomes: *why* do we go to camp? And how do the camps we attend meet strategic goals we've set for our overall ministry vision?

I have personally attended hundreds of camp experiences as camp staff, as a speaker or speaker's spouse (my husband and I are both youth workers and actually got our start in camp ministry), and as an attendee with students. Some camps highlight *activities* and offer everything from horseback riding to BMX tracks. Other camps showcase *programming* and recruit professional bands and speakers.

Whatever the methodology, it often seems the end goal is for kids to have fun, make new friends, and *hopefully experience God along the way.* Unfortunately, we sometimes spend so much energy on the first two items that we get distracted from the last part. Yet focused time away from life's everyday distractions can offer some of the best opportunities to create space for transformation.

Camp and retreat experiences can also prepare the way for starting or building faith practices that become part of a student's non-camp life. It was with this hope that a group gathered with FYI to explore connections between effective camp and retreat ministry and Sticky Faith. What follows is the fruit of that conversation.

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## New Ways of Doing Camp

Some camps are making intentional and dramatic shifts in programming choices to create unique spiritual experiences. One interesting example is the way [YouthFront](#) in Kansas City has reimagined camp to incorporate contemplative spiritual practices as part of the day-to-day camp experience. Micah Thomas, resident of the Youthfront LaCygne community, joined our conversation to share his perspective on how YouthFront is doing camp differently and why it's making a difference.

### **FYI: How does YouthFront view the camp experience as an opportunity for spiritual formation?**

MT: We have tried to dismantle the “theme park attraction” model of marketing a camp experience through the stuff we have to do. We have found that kids do not respond well to that. Yet fun is still really important; we've made an effort to think theologically about play.

We talk a lot about creating spaces and environments for young people to live into and to give them choices and opportunities to participate, as opposed to forcing them to do things. We've tried to change some of the activities that used to fill a camp day. We introduced morning and midday [fixed hour prayer](#). Our staff recognized this as a vital part of our own spiritual formation, and we invited others to join us.

Initially it was super weird and felt really strange. The room where prayers are held feels different than other spaces at camp. We do not provide instruction; instead we engage in prayer and everyone joins us. This is not a quick, exciting thing; it is a long road. As staff we try to get out of the way and create a space where possibilities exist.

### **FYI: What kind of feedback have you received?**

MT: The responses from students have been varied. At first there was surprise and curiosity. Some kids say the best part of their week was the morning or midday prayer. At the same time, others are checked out and feel tortured or bored.

The feedback from youth workers also has been mixed. Some think it's great while others feel like it is a struggle. Many youth workers have a hard time with the prayer not being interactive enough.

### **FYI: How do you prepare the camp staff?**

MT: We talk about fixed hour prayer as a discipline. It's a practice. It holds a possibility. Young people don't have to like it, but they are still invited to be there.

Our camp staff approach formation as a community, which changes the way staff prepare for and lead camp experiences.

### **FYI: How do you think about the long-term rhythms beyond the week at camp, and what do you do to help shape those or encourage them?**

MT: We try to make camp more like real life and eliminate the camp high as much as possible. We do think camp is particular, and there is a difference between being there from being at home. There is value in having a rhythm of periodically being away from students' normal environments. But the camp experience is not designed to raise their heart rates or have a mountain top experience. We hope camp is a point along the way, where people can slow down and open themselves to what God is trying to do.

We talk with students about what happens when they leave camp. Each camper gets a journal to take home and we encourage them that they can pray themselves anytime. We try to introduce young people to spiritual formation during the week and send them home with ways to practice. Programs have a beginning and end; practices don't.

### **FYI: How can youth workers use the camp experience more intentionally?**

MT: Youth leaders should ask themselves what they hope teenagers take home from a camp experience and build from there. Figure out which pieces are transferrable, and then create concrete steps that move students forward. I think it's important to prepare kids for camp and to pray for what God is doing in their lives. It is also important to connect with parents and prepare them as partners of the camp experience.

## More Fresh Alternatives to Camp-As-Usual

The YouthFront approach is dynamic because the entire camp experience flows from a contemplative-based philosophy. Other camps and churches have begun to try new ideas along these same lines, sometimes on a smaller scale, with their camp and retreat environments.

### Intentional Retreats

Many churches attend a weeklong summer camp experience that is generally activity-driven with a featured outside speaker. Many camps offer fall or winter camp weekend experiences, often marketed as 40 hours of adrenaline. Some churches have added a more intentional weekend retreat in whatever season makes the most sense in their context (for ours it's fall), creating a slower-paced experience with a focus on relationships and spiritual formation.

Some best practices from churches creating these unique experiences include:

- Placing a focus on the small group experience, allowing kids to form bonds with each other that will continue when they

are home from camp.

- Intentionally inviting different voices to teach or share from within the community. For example, empowering volunteer leaders to teach or share their story, as opposed to the youth director creating a series of talks for the weekend.
- Scheduling one-on-one meetings between an adult leader and a student as part of the camp experience. While many camps encourage this interaction, it is often difficult to find the time to meet with students among the various camp activities. By creating the space for one-on-ones to be part of the schedule, each student is cared for and isn't missing out on other activities.
- De-programming the schedule more than usual, opening up more space for play, rest, and relational connection.
- Introducing students to ways to engage God through contemplative prayer practices and silence, and allowing time for practicing these new disciplines.

### Bringing in Collaborative Voices

Some camps have changed models from a single speaker-centered teaching experience to a more collaborative model in which there are multiple voices heard by the students throughout the weekend.

The traditional model highlights a gifted speaker who gives four messages throughout the weekend retreat. In some cases, after each message the students meet in small groups and talk about what the speaker had to say. This adapted model takes advantage of a high quality communicator and adds an interactive approach to the learning process for high school students by breaking the groups down into more manageable sizes, like a classroom.

Taking a different twist on this model, the collaborative approach highlights different speakers throughout the camp experience, either through a large group teaching or by offering many teaching opportunities that students can choose from. This model allows for a range of voices, giving students an opportunity to learn in a variety of ways from different perspectives.

The responses of the students are mixed on these approaches. Some students like both the routine and the relational connection they can feel with one speaker over an entire weekend. With different speakers, students may feel like it was difficult to find a rhythm during the teaching. Other students recognize the value of hearing different voices throughout the camp experience, and enjoy getting different perspectives each time.

### Application for Your Ministry

So how should we view camps and use the camp experience within our own context? How do we know which camp is best for our group? What is the purpose of camps and retreats in our overall process for spiritual formation within our community? Here are a few suggestions for working this out in your ministry.

#### *1. Be honest about the role that the camp experience provides for your group's spiritual formation.*

Many churches and groups go to camp because it is an expected part of youth programming, but do not really ever ask *why* they go to camp. Think through:

- How does a camp or retreat experience benefit the spiritual formation of students?
- Does the timing of the camp experience flow with other ministry goals? For example, attending camp at the beginning of the summer might be an intentional way to build community. Conversely, holding a ski retreat over winter break or a New Year's camp may interfere with family time and needed down-time for students.
- Does the cost of camp (money, time, human resources, etc.) justify the benefit of camp?

#### *2. Be open and courageous enough to partner with or change camps, even if there is legacy and loyalty with your particular camp.*

This can be particularly difficult if the students have great memories at a specific camp or if the church attends a denominational camp. Creating a partnership with the camp can be a way to have a voice in forming the camp experience without changing camps. Ask yourself:

- How could this camp experience be more aligned with our ministry's goals of spiritual formation?
- Is the student experience at camp detrimental to their overall spiritual growth?
- How can I partner with the program team at the camp to create more meaningful experiences? (For ideas about helping navigate change, check out our free [Making Changes Stick Toolkit](#) resources).

#### *3. Come up with measurable outcomes for spiritual formation beyond numbers or "decisions".*

Maybe you have heard the old adage of measuring a youth camp experience: If we didn't end life or create life, then it was a success. On the other side of this view, some insist on evaluating camp by the number of "decisions made for Christ." Perhaps there are other ways to measure the camp experience. With your team, explore:

- When students come home from this camp, what do you hope they have gained from the experience? How will this be evidenced in their lives or in the group?
- Imagine telling a story about the student experience at camp when you get back. What excites you about what the camp experience can be?

4. Think more holistically about the camp experience.

Create the space needed to embrace and take advantage of the camp experience. For example:

- Host pre-camp and post-camp meetings for students with a focus on spiritual formation rather than logistics.
- Schedule a parent meeting an hour before the students return home to update the parents on what the students experienced and to partner with them in their child's spiritual growth. Send out an email with follow-up questions parents can ask their kids or specific ways they can be praying for their spiritual growth in light of camp.
- For retreats your team organizes, create practices that students experience at camp and then can take home. Give them tools for making this transition from the retreat experience to everyday life.

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