

Outdoor Ministries: "Sow Seeds: Trust the Promise"

Episcopal camps and conference centers provide a unique answer to the call "Come ye apart." In the Episcopal Church, it has by and large been the young people who first responded to this call. Some of the church's camps have operated continuously for many years: Incarnation Camp and Conference Center at Ivoryton, Connecticut, for example, celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

Through the years, literally hundreds of thousands of young people have become acquainted with the church, other young people and adults in these special environments. The term "outdoor education" has recently replaced "camping" as a more adequate way to describe such experiences. However, while programs have changed, the basic concept still is to assist young people in their search for faith and relationship in the midst of God's natural beauty. Programs and leadership differ widely from one diocese to another as each attempts to fine-tune its ministry to suit the unique setting and developing life-issues at hand.

It would be hard to imagine a list of "special opportunities that no young person should miss" that wouldn't include some form of summer camp as an important item. Camping opportunities offered by the church (as distinguished from secular counterparts) are special because each has at its core real-life experiences of building and maintaining Christian community. Perhaps nowhere other than in such a camp can a young person be so powerfully and yet securely confronted with the pain of separation and the joy of forgiveness and acceptance. Mistakes, caring and celebration go on 24 hours per day in camp when young people are all in it together.

Many who are now adults fondly recall the importance of a contact made one summer, years ago, that shaped their whole lives. Often it was a camp counselor or chaplain; sometimes the graced relationship was with the cook, the lifeguard, or another camper.

The power of such memories has led many in later years to ask themselves and others why such life-changing encounters cannot continue in adult life. From struggles with this question, and from the parish churches' need for an occasional change of pace, have come the Church's conference centers, places where people of all ages can go from time to time for renewal, reflection and continuing education and exploration in the faith. In the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in conference centers owned and operated by the dioceses of the Episcopal Church. The Venture in Mission campaigns conducted throughout the church have provided millions of needed dollars for restoration of camps and construction of new diocesan conference facilities.

Now and in the future, the impact of these facilities on the life of the church is profound. Thousands of vestries, parish groups and diocesan staffs are discovering what young campers learned long ago: there is something special and lasting about responding to the conference center's invitation to "Come ye apart." Barriers come down, people listen better, relax, play, gain new insights and worship differently. Spending a weekend at a church camp or conference center is quite a different experience in Christian living from the parish coffee hour, or from the meeting where there is never enough time to do the job and still care deeply for those involved.

Bread and wine shared under a 300-year-old oak beside a brook with a tune and tempo of its own, or in a room where anger and misunderstanding have turned to comprehension, compassion and joy—these are truly peak experiences. Such occasions provide critically important lessons about life and faith, for we discover that there's more to people than meets the eye; and we can resolve differences without alienation; and that the God of nature is also the God of our environment. For every age, the church's camp and conference centers are a special kind of oasis. They not only help train the church of the future, they actually sustain the church of today.

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