



## OUTDOOR MINISTRIES = EDUCATIONAL MINISTRIES BY BRYAN BREAUT

A strong outdoor ministries program is an extension of the local church's religious education, not a product to be consumed. Outdoor ministry professionals generally do not comprehend their work apart from the partner relationship with pastors and religious education directors. Speaking for myself, I can't imagine running a camp without the central purpose of creating interior and exterior space for the Holy Spirit to move. The camp week often underscores and supports what has been learned at church through the year and energizes people's faith as they return to home, school, and church.

As I move through my year, preparing for those fast-flying three months of summer, and as I direct the program itself, I am aware of two aspects of Jesus' ministry that are central to my work as a United Church of Christ Director of Outdoor Ministries -- prayer and community. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus often leaves the bustling crowds in order to enter into prayer. We read about Jesus going to the mountain, the wilderness, the lakeshore, and to a lonely place in order to be free of all distractions and to focus on God. When Jesus is finished, he always returns into the heart of community, where he spends the bulk of his time.

This drawing away and coming together is central to Christian camping. We withdraw from our day-to-day and enter a community of believers and seekers. As the world grows more connected by various electronic

wonders, we ironically seem to be growing less connected to one another. Most church camps encourage or require that electronic devices be left at home. I've seen young people go through true withdrawal as they face the unfamiliar and uncomfortable sensation of being unplugged. It takes about a day and half before those sensations give way to that which they so effectively suppress. What ensues is a joyful blossoming of self. As children, young people, and adults connect with themselves, they find connecting with others who are doing the same to be natural and organic. The comment I hear most often from campers and counselors is, "At camp I can be myself."

Into this phenomenon, inject several elements: intentional community-building, fellowship, soulful worship, time for reflection, and purposeful Christian programming. It's a



trusted recipe and the yield is room for the Holy Spirit -- room within the community as well as inside each human heart.

Remember, camp is not just for children. Most camps have family and adult programs as well. When I speak at churches urging them to support and utilize our camping program, I ask how many people would own a beautiful, peaceful, and sacred place on a quiet lake and never go there! As members of the church, they are, in fact, partners in this endeavor. Religious educators play a crucial part in the flow of energy and faith-building which happens at camp and then returns to the church.

There are so many ways to support camping ministries:

- Enthusiastically support the promotional efforts of the camp by displaying posters and camp brochures, provided by the camp, in key places.
- Create a camp bulletin board displaying photos from your church members' time at camp.
- Hold a Camp Sunday. Often members of your camp's operating committee can help out and visit your church. Invite children and adults who have attended camp to speak. Sing camp songs, create an altar on the chancel made from canoe paddles and an unlit campfire. Afterwards, hold an information session for parents and others who may be interested. Be sure to hand out camp brochures.



- Ask the camp to send someone to a youth group meeting, and ask them to bring photos to project. If your camp has a promotional video, show it.
  - Link your camp's website from your church's website.
  - Write articles for your church's newsletter. Ask campers to do the same.
  - Publicize any and all available scholarship funds. Include special groups such as women's fellowship and your judicatory, as well.
  - If your program utilizes volunteers, try to encourage adults to participate as counselors.
  - Bring your youth group to a work day or hold a retreat at the camp.
  - Find out which songs are most loved at camp and use them in your Sunday school and youth programs.
  - Get a list of who is signed up for camp from your church and send them mail during their week of camp. Check in with them when they return.
  - Call your camp director and ask what you can do to get your church more involved.
  - Ask your pastor to remember camp during the prayer time.
- Create a culture that includes camp as a vital part of your program. You will not only be supporting your camping program, you will be offering a great gift to your church members. And you will notice an incredibly positive effect on your church community.

**BRYAN BREault** is the Director of Outdoor Ministries for the Maine Conference United Church of Christ, where for nine years he has directed Pilgrim Lodge in West Gardiner, Maine. He has served as a pastor for churches in Connecticut and Washington state. Bryan is married and has a five-year-old son. To learn more about outdoor ministries in the Maine Conference, visit [www.pilgrimlodge.org](http://www.pilgrimlodge.org).