

## Summer Camp: Community, Faith, Transformation

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At summer camp it is impossible to not experience the transformative love of God. From first thing in the morning as we raise our voices in praise to the quiet devotion conversations in the cabin as the sun goes down, each day is filled and overflowing with the joy of the Lord. The growth at camp happens at every level. One child will grow emotionally, learning to navigate new friendships. Another will grow physically, being challenged by a ropes course. Another child will grow spiritually, learning that they are loved and forgiven for the first time. Campers, staff, parents, volunteers, and congregations are all part of this process, allowing children to have a genuine experience of God, which is one of the key factors that will lead to future involvement in a local community of faith.

Research done by Dr. John Bowen at the Wycliffe College, Toronto, and detailed in the book Growing Up Christian ( Regent College Publishing: Vancouver, 2010) points out that young people raised in churches and participating in camp, largely point to their relationship with God as the reason they stayed in church or returned to church as young adults. This relationship with God can be nurtured by time spent at camp, in creation, in forming authentic friendships, and in worship.

One of the cornerstones of summer camp is time spent in the outdoors. Most children in North America spent up to ten times as much time in front of a screen than they do outdoors. Wonder is cultivated by spending time searching for starfish on the beach, licking slugs in the forest, paddling down a lazy river, exploring for bugs in a park, and reaching the peak of a mountain. Time spent outdoors opens children up to the majesty and wildness of God's creation and helps the Psalms come alive. God is immediate and real in creation.

A relationship with God is also nurtured by caring friendships with both peers and mentors. Just as Jesus is God in skin and bones for us, our friends become as Christ for us. Counsellors spend time with campers, teaching and encouraging. They facilitate friendships within a cabin group. A child who feels unloved or invisible at home, becomes part of a vital community. They are reminded by their counsellors that they are valued and loved. While Bible study is an important part of each day, the Christian story is lived out in the daily experience of friendship.

At Camp Kintail, one of the most interactive parts of our week is closing worship on Friday evening. Every cabin takes responsibility for a portion of the service, and we are led by the campers. It is not perfect or practiced worship, but it is heartfelt. With arms raised high, with hands joined to the hands next to them, with eyes closed in concentration, with voices lifted in harmony, we experience the presence of God to be real and immediate. In our hearts and in our bodies, we know that God is near. A relationship with God is both witnessed and experienced in worship, a gift that campers take home with them.

At camp, it is our hope that every child is able to deepen the relationship with God that as always existed. Through time in creation, time nurturing friendships, and time in worship, we pray that a child's experience will draw them close to the transformative love of God. Everyday all summer long, this life-changing ministry is happening across the continent. Come and be a part of this holy work!

1. Establish a campership program in your congregation. If you don't have children who can attend camp, find a neighbourhood child or partner with an agency as an outreach.
2. Find a way to include children who have attended camp to tell their stories when they return. This could be through worship, a newsletter article, or a presentation at the women's group.
3. Use the scripture from the camp's summer curriculum as the base for a sermon series or a Christian education event.