

CAMP YOUTH LEADERSHIP TRAINING: A HIDDEN RESOURCE FOR THE CHURCH

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Introduction

Where are the future leaders of churches and ministries in Canada going to come from? Is there anything being done now that is effective in reaching these future leaders? How can churches be part of training young Christian leaders? These questions and more are on the minds of many Canadian Christians in this new decade. Dr. Marv Penner, Executive Director of the Coalition For Youth Ministry Excellence, says,

Recently, many denominations and Christian organizations have recognized a looming leadership crisis as ministry veterans are moving rapidly toward retirement. I can't remember a time in my ministry life where it has been as important as it is today to be intentional about raising up a generation of godly, courageous, and confident leaders for the church in Canada.¹

An avenue for Christian leadership training and development that is producing results and directly benefiting churches exists currently in Canada. Christian camps are running highly developed leadership training programs that prepare youth for church and ministry leadership.

Extent

The extent of leadership training programs being offered to youth at Christian residential camps in British Columbia and across Canada, and the impact this is having on Canadian churches, is not well-known. Dr. Jacob Sorenson states, "Camps are sometimes dismissed among church professionals as little more than fun and games, or a brief spiritual high that quickly fades."² Yet Christian camps are making a vital contribution to youth leadership development that is positively impacting churches in Canada. According to Penner, a veteran youth worker with more than 45 years of experience in youth ministry:

¹ Marv Penner, DPhil, interviewed by author, January 17, 2020.

² Jacob Sorenson, "Assessing the Power of Camp." *In Site Magazine* (Colorado Springs: Christian Camping and Conference Association, January-February 2019): 44-49.

Most people who look at the Christian camping movement across our country see outstanding programming for children and families with plenty of camaraderie and creativity thrown in. The casual observer would likely have no idea that a significant leadership development environment exists behind the laughter, relationships, shared experiences, and fun that they see on the surface. In fact, camp is one of the most efficient youth leadership development laboratories that exists in our country today.³

Many Christian camps across Canada offer youth leadership training programs. Training and providing discipleship to young leaders is a notable facet of the Christian camping movement. Over 200 residential camps and conference centres in all provinces except Newfoundland are members of CCI-Canada, the Canadian Association of Christian Camping International, a world-wide alliance of Christian camping associations in more than 30 countries. A review of CCI-Canada member camp websites shows that at least 93 camps across the country offer youth leadership programs, representing almost half of all member camps.⁴ Another 39 camps in British Columbia are part of the Fellowship of Christian Camps (FCC-BC), five of which are also members of CCI-Canada. All five CCI-Canada member camps in British Columbia and 21 FCC-BC camps offer youth leadership programs.⁵ In addition, the United Church of Canada has 56 camps across Canada including Newfoundland. At least 33 United Church camps offer leadership training to high school students.⁶ The websites of camps that belong to CCI-Canada, FCC-BC, and the United Church of Canada reveal that at least 147 Canadian church-related camps are offering leadership training to youth, or more than half (50.7%) of all of the camps that are members of these three organizations.

Christian Camps and Conference Centres in Canada that Offer Leadership Programs for Youth

	CCI-Canada camps	FCC-BC camps*	United Church camps	Totals of all three camps
Number of camps	200	34	56	290
Youth leadership programs offered	93	21	33	147

³ Penner, interview.

⁴ Canadian Association of Christian Camping International, <https://www.cci-canada.ca>, accessed on January 16, 2020.

⁵ Fellowship of Christian Camps-BC, <http://christiancamps.ca/find-a-camp>, accessed on January 16, 2020.

⁶ United Church of Canada, https://www.united-church.ca/search/locator/all?keyw=&dmission_units_ucc_ministry_type_advanced=6&loc11, accessed on January 28, 2020.

* Note that the BC camps that are members of both CCI-Canada and FCC-BC are included in the CCI-Canada totals, not in the FCC-BC totals.

Hundreds of students are receiving leadership training at Christian camps in Canada each summer. At Camp Qwanoes on Vancouver Island in BC, over 180 high school students and young adults participated in leadership programs in 2019.⁷ Since the Counselor-In-Training (CIT) program began in 1983, approximately 2,400 high school students and young adults have been trained and discipled in leadership programs at Camp Qwanoes.⁸

Leadership training and discipleship of youth are clearly an important feature of the Christian camping movement in Canada. Each year large numbers of high school students and young adults return to their communities better equipped to serve and lead. Their youth leadership training programs support the conclusion of the national young adult survey report, *Renegotiating Faith*, published in 2018, “Camps are an important form of Christian ministry in Canada.”⁹

Program Structure

Many Christian camps in Canada have a series of highly developed youth leadership programs that are meant to build on each other, with the hope that a high school student will participate and continue to be discipled for at least two summers. Some examples of Canadian camps with at least several levels of leadership training for high school students and young adults include Camp Iawah,¹⁰ Camp Mini-Yo-We,¹¹ Medeba Adventure Learning Centre,¹² Muskoka Bible Centre,¹³ Pioneer Camp Ontario,¹⁴ Green Bay Bible Camp,¹⁵ Camp Tulahead,¹⁶ Pines Bible Camp,¹⁷ and Camp Qwanoes.¹⁸ Many other camps in Canada that offer leadership training to youth have at least two levels of leadership training.

⁷ Camp Qwanoes, Leadership Program Registration Records, 2019.

⁸ Camp Qwanoes, Leadership Program Registration Records, 1983-2019.

⁹ Rick Heimstra, Lorianne Dueck and Matthew Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith: The Delay in Young Adult Identity Formation and What It Means for the Church in Canada* (Toronto: Faith Today Publications, 2018), 70.

¹⁰ Iawah, Godfrey, ON, <https://iawah.com/youth-development/>.

¹¹ Camp Mini-Yo-We, Port Sydney, ON, <https://www.miniyowe.com/>.

¹² Medeba Adventure Learning Centre, West Guilford, ON <https://medeba.com/leadership-development/>.

¹³ Muskoka Bible Centre, Huntsville, ON, <http://steppingstones.muskokabiblecentre.com/summer/>.

¹⁴ Pioneer Camp Ontario, Port Sydney, ON, <https://www.pioneercampontario.ca/summer-camp/teens-leadership/>.

¹⁵ Green Bay Bible Camp, West Kelowna, BC, <http://www.greenbay.bc.ca/>.

¹⁶ Camp Tulahead, Princeton, BC, <https://www.camptulahead.com/light>.

¹⁷ Pines Bible Camp, Grand Forks, BC, <http://pinesbiblecamp.com/leaders-in-training/>.

¹⁸ Camp Qwanoes, Crofton, BC, <http://www.qwanoes.ca/leadership/>.

The youth leadership training at Camp Qwanoes typifies a well-developed program with several stages. Camp Qwanoes offers three stages of summer leadership training for high school students, a new year-round discipleship program for high school students, and a first-year college program with a leadership focus. The training occurs in the classroom and in the field because the stages are run concurrently with camp sessions.

The first stage of youth leadership development at Camp Qwanoes, Step-Out, is a two-week program for ages 15 to 16. The first week emphasis is on learning, both in a classroom setting and through experiences. In a small group of about 10 to 12 others, along with their leaders, participants learn about spiritual growth and how God can use their spiritual gifts, passions, abilities, personality, and experiences to help others and impact the world. They receive an orientation to serving in a variety of camp areas, take part in fun camp activities, and attend most daily chapel sessions with the campers and staff. The second week emphasis is on gaining practical ministry experience and hands-on training, serving with leaders in an operations support role as part of the dishwashing team. The training encourages and challenges participants to grow closer to God, develop positive new friendships, gain a vision for life in Christ, make a difference as they learn and serve in the midst of summer camp, and get involved in a church back in their own communities when leaving camp if they are not already.

The Counselor-In-Training (CIT) program, a four-week program for ages 16 to 18, is the second stage of leadership training. It includes qualified applicants who have not taken the Step-Out program. The CIT program, first offered at Camp Qwanoes in 1983, is considered the foundational leadership program for high school students and it is designed to prepare them for Christian ministry at camp and back in their communities. The emphasis in the first two weeks is on learning and discipleship with experienced camp leaders in a classroom setting and through experiences as part of a group of 35 to 40. Participants have the opportunity to serve in a variety of camp areas, learn how to be instructors in camp activities, and attend most daily chapel sessions with all campers and staff. During the third week, participants serve as junior counselors alongside experienced senior counselors, or in activity or operations support roles, in the areas of food services, maintenance, or recreational activities. In the fourth week, participants serve in activity or operations support roles. In the CIT program, participants are encouraged and challenged to grow personally and spiritually, acquire skills in leadership and ministry that will be valuable for the rest of their lives, develop strong friendships with like-minded peers, discover more about God's call on their lives, and have an enjoyable experience while doing so.

The third stage of leadership training for high school students at Camp Qwanoes is the Leader-In-Training (LIT) program. Older teenagers ages 17 to 18 who are qualified graduates of the CIT program or who have equivalent experience at another camp choose from two options: LIT-Full (minimum eight weeks) and LIT-Lite (minimum four weeks). Both options require two full weeks of more advanced training. First, they participate in the Staff Training week at the beginning of the summer for all camp staff. Then they learn together as a group of about 25 to 30 with their leaders in the classroom and through experiences. Training and discipleship continues in their remaining weeks at camp, as LITs serve in key roles on the summer staff team and gain valuable leadership training and experience in roles such as counselling, activity leading, program assistance, and operations support. LITs are inspired and challenged to serve God in the present day in a significant way, mature spiritually, continue to acquire skills in leadership and ministry that will be valuable for the rest of their lives, and pursue their life mission to accomplish the purposes of God. The LIT program is designed to prepare the LITs for future leadership roles, particularly in camp, church, and other ministries.

A new, year-round discipleship program for high school students called enRoute, initiated by Camp Qwanoes in partnership with churches and the Fellowship Pacific Ministry Centre, is currently being developed. This program, for high school students in grades 10 to 12 who have successfully completed a Qwanoes summer leadership program, builds on what they learn in the summer, helps them apply it back home in their churches and communities, and encourages continued growth and leadership development between summers. Working closely with church leaders, experienced leaders at Camp Qwanoes will provide ongoing encouragement and support to help students stay connected to believers their own age who are also seeking to follow Christ, gain solid spiritual foundations that will guide them for the rest of their lives, and learn how to make a difference in God's Kingdom in the present while gaining a vision for their lives.

The Kaléo program at Camp Qwanoes, running successfully in partnership with Briercrest College and Seminary since 2003, is a unique eight-month foundational leadership college program that develops young Christian leaders. Students come to the Kaléo program from across Canada. Spiritual and personal growth takes place through fully-accredited Briercrest academics, leadership training, close-knit community, front-line ministry, and the best of west coast adventure, including multi-day sailing, surfing, and skiing or snowboarding excursions. Students put into practice what they are learning on an ongoing basis through serving children and youth in a dynamic camp

ministry setting, local church ministry, outreach events, and a cross-cultural missions trip. Sid Koop, a professor in the Kaléo program and organizer of the Canadian Youth Workers Conferences (CWYC), says, “The holistic element of the learning is fantastic.”¹⁹ One of the courses in the program, Camp and Youth Ministry, draws key principles and examples from camp ministry that can be applied to a wide variety of ministries to children and youth, both inside and outside the church. Students learn what is involved in forming and contributing to a ministry team and how to understand and minister to children and youth, while gaining knowledge of and experience in practical ministry skills.

Many Christian camps across Canada offer leadership training programs to youth which seek to increase their knowledge of Scripture and how to apply it, develop their skills and abilities through a variety of leadership experiences, and train them for future leadership and service in churches, ministry organizations, and communities. Camps that offer leadership training for high school students usually offer at least two levels of training and some offer three levels or more that may extend to recent high school graduates.

Participants

The participants in youth leadership programs at Christian camps in Canada are mainly high school students. Youth leadership programs at Christian camps in Canada are most commonly offered to those ages 14 or 15 to age 17. Some camps have programs that start as early as age 12 and at least nine camps offer leadership training and discipleship to young adults.²⁰ Most camps require students to apply for their leadership programs, although some simply require students to register.

Many applicants for youth leadership programs at camps have been participants at camps in previous summers; some indicate that they have been looking forward for years to being old enough to take part. Others have been encouraged by their church leaders or friends to attend these programs. Many children and youth reached through Christian camping, whether or not they are from a Christian family background, choose to be discipled and trained through camp leadership training programs. Participants come from all income levels; leadership program participants at Camp Qwanoes are sponsored from low-income areas. Some have completed the Kaléo program and are currently serving in significant ways in Christian ministry. Vancouver’s

¹⁹ Camp Qwanoes and Briercrest, *Kaléo: A Fully-Accredited College Leadership Program*, <https://youtu.be/vWrGEOkngXE>.

²⁰ From review of Canadian Christian camp websites, accessed January 2020.

Union Gospel Mission²¹ sponsored Holly Bishu Goetz, who came from a single parent household, to go to camp when she was 10 years old. Her positive camp experience for four summers made her want to come back as a CIT. Goetz successfully completed the CIT program, the LIT program and, the following year, before going to university, the Kaléo program.²²

At Camp Qwanoes, many Step-Out program participants are campers who decided to put their faith in Christ at camp in an earlier summer. Approximately 55 to 60 percent of campers at Camp Qwanoes lack a church background.²³ Many applicants are struggling in their faith and having difficulty navigating life as a Christ-follower in a society where doing so is becoming increasingly unpopular and support can be hard to find. Because church attendance is required for admission into the CIT program, a number of applicants begin attending and getting involved in a church in their communities. Most applicants to the LIT program have successfully completed the CIT program the previous summer or have received equivalent training in their churches or at another camp. Applicants to the Kaléo program must meet both the entrance requirements of Briercrest College and the staff member requirements of Camp Qwanoes.

Most Christian camps in Canada require youth leadership program aspirants to go through a formal application process. All applicants to the summer leadership programs at Camp Qwanoes are required to complete an application form, submit a resumé and a signed “Responsibilities of Qwanoes Staff Members” form, and get three references. After applications are reviewed, all leadership program applicants are contacted for an interview. For the Step-Out program, applicants have to profess that they have put their faith in Christ and want to grow in their faith. Attending a church is preferred but active involvement is not required. Applicants to the CIT program must be believers in Jesus, growing in faith and active in service as demonstrated by local church involvement. LIT program applicants must be Christ-followers, continuing to grow in their faith and serving in their local church. The demonstrated Christian commitment required becomes greater for applicants as they proceed through the different levels of these programs. Christian camps that offer youth leadership programs have similar requirements for their applicants.²⁴

²¹ “Why Camp Matters: Holly’s Story,” *Gratitude*. (Vancouver, BC: Union Gospel Mission, May 2014).

²² Holly Bishu Goetz, interviewed by author, January 17, 2020.

²³ Camp Qwanoes, Camper Registration Records, 2004-2019.

²⁴ Examples include: Timberline Ranch, Maple Ridge, BC, <http://www.timberlinerranch.com/get-involved/lit-leaders-in-training/>, Green Bay Bible Camp, West Kelowna, BC, <http://www.greenbay.bc.ca/level-1-discipleship-training-program/>, Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp, Coleman, AB, <https://www.crowcamp.ca/camps/training-programs>, Red Rock Bible Camp, Steinbach, MB,

Outcomes

Youth are being prepared for church and ministry leadership through youth leadership programs offered by Christian camps. The approach of providing leadership training to youth in the Christian summer camp setting is producing demonstrable results. Clearly these programs are a key resource for churches. Stated outcomes include participants growing personally and spiritually, developing positive friendships that help them stay strong in their faith, acquiring valuable skills in leadership and ministry, and being prepared to step into ministry positions when going back to churches in the fall.

Participants gain solid spiritual foundations and character is shaped in youth leadership programs. Many develop their personal work ethic as they experience having job responsibilities for the first time. Self-confidence is gained as they are given responsibilities they would likely have not been given away from camp, as they experience activities that show them that the seemingly impossible may actually be quite possible, and as they make their faith their own away from their families in a safe environment. Krista Penner, team leader for leadership development for the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in British Columbia and Yukon, has been a key partner in the planning for the new enRoute program at Camp Qwanoes. Penner says,

Camp ministry offers young leaders the unique intersection of deep connection and belonging with the invitation to explore tough questions about God and culture that helps them develop a strong foundation for life. This foundation prepares them to share the gospel in their generation with God-centred confidence and love.²⁵

Participants develop positive new friendships and stronger friendships with like-minded peers, while enjoying the example and encouragement of experienced leaders. The high school years can be difficult for Christian youth to navigate successfully, in a society that has turned away from God. The Christian friendships made and developed in youth leadership programs are vital for many in choosing to be faithful and withstand the many pressures they face in their lives. According to the *Renegotiating Faith* report, not only do camps provide an ideal environment for mentoring relationships to be established, students are offered excellent opportunities to connect with peers

<https://redrockbiblecamp.com/cit/>, Muskoka Bible Centre, Huntsville, ON, <http://steppingstones.muskokabiblecentre.com/application/>, Medeba Adventure Learning Centre, West Guilford, ON <https://medeba.com/summer-camp/lit/lit-1-application/>, Iawah, Godfrey, ON, <https://iawah.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2020-YDLP-Info-Guide.pdf>, Camp Widjiitiwin, Huntsville, ON, <https://widjiitiwin.ca/our-season/salt/>.

²⁵ Krista Penner, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

who are serious about their faith.”²⁶ The resulting friendships often endure over time. Goetz says, “It was at CIT that I truly felt loved and accepted by people my own age for the first time.”²⁷ Goetz says that she has friends that she met as a CIT in 2008.

The significance of positive friendships and mentoring relationships that develop as a result of participation in camp youth leadership programs cannot be underestimated. John Bowen, professor emeritus of evangelism at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto, conducted a study of participants in the leadership training programs of Ontario Pioneer Camp from 1981 to 1997.²⁸ Bowen and his wife had worked with a total of over 1,200 youth during that time period at Ontario Pioneer Camp. The study researched what caused some to leave Christianity and the church, and what caused others to become Christian leaders inside and outside the church.²⁹ Of the 333 who responded to his survey, 75 percent of the respondents (251) claimed to be active Christians.³⁰ Of the 75 percent, a large majority (80.9%) said that their Christian friendships played a significant role in their continuing in their faith.³¹ A number noted that they found a supportive Christian community at camp: “A Christian summer camp, where leaders are charged with the care and welfare of children, where they plan and lead fun events, and where they support and pray for one another, provides a powerful matrix for that kind of friendship to develop.”³²

Leadership program participants learn and develop skills in leadership and ministry that will be valuable for a lifetime. They gain practical ministry experience and hands-on training in a variety of camp areas, such as learning how to be an activity instructor or to lead a Bible study. They learn how to be part of a team and experience first-hand the importance of each member of the team to the success of a ministry. While they are serving at camp as part of a leadership program, they are part of impacting the lives of the campers at camp. Participants learn that they can serve God in the present day in a significant way.

In camp youth leadership programs, participants discover how God can use their unique gifts and abilities to make a difference in the world. They gain a vision for their lives.

²⁶ Hiemstra, Dueck and Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith*, 70.

²⁷ Goetz, Interview.

²⁸ John P. Bowen, *Growing Up Christian: Why Young People Leave Church, and (Sometimes) Come Back to Church* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2010), 15.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 15-16.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

³¹ *Ibid*, 43.

³² *Ibid*, 50.

Young adults whose giftings and talents were identified and who were encouraged to consider a career that made use of those talents were often able to see a trajectory for their lives.... Many young adults identified a career or calling while working in a leadership role or in an environment where others identified their gifts and talents and encouraged them.³³

Having this opportunity to use their gifts helps ensure that students will want to stay involved in Christian ministry well beyond their time at camp. “If every believer uses his or her gifts, the church will be built as God wants. If believers are being assisted in discovering their gifts and putting them into use, people’s arms will not need to be twisted to serve and passionate pleas for help will not need to be made.”³⁴

The Fuller Youth Institute conducted the College Transition Project from 2004 to 2010, involving more than 500 youth group graduates.³⁵ Reinforcing the need to identify and encourage the gifts and abilities of students to help them to solidify their faith, the project found:

Not only does learning competence in an area promote overall thriving in kids, but it is also specifically tied to helping faith stick beyond high school. In both our study and others, giving students meaningful and skill-developing opportunities to serve their youth group and church matters – right now and for years to come.³⁶

Leadership training and experience prepares youth for immediate and future Christian leadership roles. Expected to take what they have been given and to pour it out to others, they learn the importance of getting involved in a church. Going back to their churches in the fall, many leadership program participants are excited and well-equipped to step into ministry positions. Ontario Pioneer Camp says, “Our leadership training programs for teens shape character and leadership skills, while inspiring youth to make a difference for Jesus in their home communities.”³⁷ Word of Life Canada says,

³³ Heimstra, Dueck and Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith*, 12.

³⁴ Don Cousins, *Experiencing Leader Shift* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 236.

³⁵ Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, Youth Worker Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 18-19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁷ Pioneer Camps Ontario, <https://www.pioneercampontario.ca/summer-camp/teens-leadership/>, accessed January 16, 2020.

“We want to see our summer staff serve in ministry at camp, and in their communities and local churches back home.”³⁸

After they graduate from high school, many camp leadership program alums go on to become pastors and church leaders. A large number of Camp Qwanoes leadership program graduates currently are serving in key leadership roles in churches and Christian organizations on Vancouver Island, in the Greater Vancouver area, across Canada, and around the world.³⁹ Out of the 457 Qwanoes CITs, at least 83 (18%) are currently in ministry roles. The majority of those currently in ministry (64 of the 83) are in church ministry roles and at least eight of those are in pastoral leadership roles. The remaining former CITs currently in ministry (19 of the 83) are involved in missions work, camp ministry, and other Christian ministries. Many more may also be in current ministry roles; Qwanoes has not been able to find the current status of many of the past CITs from 2012-2019. Also note that the CITs from 1983-2011 are not included in this research.⁴⁰ Further, out of the 404 students who participated in the Kaléo program from 2003-2019, at least 65 (16%) are currently in ministry roles. The majority of those currently in ministry (29 out of the 65) are in church ministry roles and at least 17 of those are in pastoral leadership roles. The remaining students currently in ministry are in camp ministry roles (16 of the 65), or are involved in missions work or other Christian ministries (20 of the 65). As with the CIT participants, Qwanoes was not able to find the current status of many past students.⁴¹

The positive outcomes of youth leadership programs at Christian camps show that they are successful in preparing youth for church and ministry leadership. Not only are students equipped to step into ministry in their communities, they prove themselves to be exceptionally well-prepared. According to Marv Penner,

I can safely say that the leaders who have been shaped and mentored in the environment of a Christian camp are almost without exception head and shoulders above the rank and file. I could always be sure that if a student had experienced the leadership development of a Christian camp that was intentional about shaping leaders for the future they

³⁸ Word of Life Canada, <https://www.wol.ca/summer-staff/>, accessed January 16, 2020.

³⁹ Examples include: Evan Klaassen (Youth Leader, Departure Bay Baptist Church, Nanaimo, BC), Jenny Shantz (Executive Director, Inner Hope Youth Ministries, Vancouver, BC), Wes Linde (Pastor of Connection & Community, SouthRidge Fellowship, Langley, BC), Jordan Wilcox (Pastor of Young Adult Ministries, Emmanuel Barrie, Barrie, ON), Rob Lee (Church Planter, Italy).

⁴⁰ Camp Qwanoes, CIT Records, 2012-2019.

⁴¹ Camp Qwanoes, Kaléo Students Record, 2003-2019.

would inevitably rise to leadership roles on the college campus and in future ministry environments.⁴²

Success Factors

The Christian camping environment has proven to be very successful in preparing youth for church and ministry leadership. At Christian camps while youth are immersed in the beauty of God's creation, they discover truth from God's Word and experience effective forms of learning in a safe, caring community away from home. Camps provide youth with an almost unparalleled opportunity to experience life change and to gain hope. Reaching people while they are young, which is a focus of most Christian camps, is strategic. In the words of Joe Russell, the founding pastor of New Beginnings Baptist Church in East Vancouver, "I was trying to think of where else kids get reached and I couldn't think of one place other than Christian camps."⁴³ Many of those who are reached as campers go on to take camp leadership programs.

Recognizing the unique potential for training offered in the camp setting, Dr. Ted Ward, a Christian educator, said, "A camp is the greatest environment for learning today."⁴⁴ Charles W. Eliot, a president of Harvard University, reportedly claimed, "The organized summer camp is the most important step in education that America has given the world."⁴⁵

Explaining why the camp setting is so effective in reaching desired outcomes, Marv Penner says:

What makes the camp setting so conducive for leadership development is that students are challenged to stretch out of their comfort zone, to push their limits and to accomplish things they never thought they were capable of. Camp is experienced as a place where fears are confronted, limits are challenged, creativity is uncovered, courage is practiced, and relational skills are honed. The combination of emotional growth, relational maturity, physical stamina, and spiritual vitality synergizing in the camp environment leads to outcomes that likely could not be produced as efficiently anywhere else.⁴⁶

⁴² Marv Penner, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

⁴³ Spoken at a Camp Qwanoes Year-Round Staff Retreat.

⁴⁴ Mattson, *Camping and the Church*.

⁴⁵ Lance Ozier, "Camp as Educator: Lessons Learned From History," <https://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/camp-educator-lessons-learned-history>.

⁴⁶ Marv Penner, Interview.

The “experiential learning” and “learning and doing” that take place at camp as students push their limits and practice courage are effective forms of leadership training. Students take what they’re learning and apply it on an ongoing basis. Camps provide almost unlimited possibilities for using adventure learning to achieve outcomes. In *God of Adventure*, Bruce Dunning, who served as the executive director of Medeba Adventure Learning Centre for over three decades writes,

There is a strong cry in our society to do more than hear the Word of God. People want to experience it... Christian adventure learning can play an important role in enhancing the process of behavioural change, and the Bible provides many examples of how adventure helped cause dramatic transformation within people’s lives.⁴⁷

Camps provide an environment away from home where youth can have overnight experiences. The Fuller Youth Institute found in their College Transition Project that overnight camp experiences “were important to faith growth for the students.”⁴⁸ Because overnight experiences away from home carve time for deep conversations, create space for sharing doubts and struggles, and build community, they “have incredible potential to open up space and time for quality faith-building. And, at least according to our study, they can be effective in nurturing faith maturity that lasts.”⁴⁹ Overnight experiences help create a setting where life change and transformation can happen at a dramatic rate. In the words of Levi VanderKwaak, a Kaléo program graduate: “This program is set up to help you grow at a rate I wouldn't have ever thought possible.”⁵⁰

Another factor that makes the leadership training ministry of Christian camping so powerful is that most camps focus on reaching the younger generations which represent the future of the church. Studies highlight the importance of people making the decision to follow Christ when they are young. In *Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions*, George Barna who heads a market research firm specializing in studying religious beliefs and behaviour says,

A series of studies we conducted regarding the age at which people accept Christ as their Savior highlights the importance of having people

⁴⁷ Bruce Dunning, *God of Adventure* (Belleville: Essence Publishing, 2012), 53, 64.

⁴⁸ Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 142.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁰ Levi VanderKwaak, *Camp Qwanoes*, 2013.

invite Jesus into their heart as their Saviour when they are young.... The importance of building strong spiritual foundations at an early age is again confirmed by recognizing that in 2003, there was virtually no difference between the spiritual standing of adults and those exiting their childhood years.⁵¹

Many students are already on a certain path by the time they reach their final years of high school. The College Transition Project found that “[t]he reality is that students’ faith trajectories are formed long before twelfth grade.”⁵²

Reaching children and youth and discipling them includes helping them to learn how to serve others while they are young. Students who work with younger children, something they have excellent opportunities to do as part of camp youth leadership programs, are more likely to persist in their faith into adulthood: “The more teenagers serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick.”⁵³ The College Transition Project also found that, “[s]tudent leaders tend to stick with their faith.... Those students who participated in leadership in their youth ministry and/or led middle school or elementary kids showed stronger faith three years later than those who didn’t.”⁵⁴

Christian camps are on the front lines of evangelism and discipleship to children and youth across North America. They are able to impact students while they are forming their life values and help them discover their call to ministry before they graduate from high school. Current research demonstrates the need to offer leadership training and development at an earlier age than at the college level. The Christian camp environment is uniquely suited to achieving success by pursuing outcomes that help youth discover their faith and prepare them for church and ministry leadership.

Impact

Youth leadership programs at Christian camps are having a significant impact on churches and other ministries, as well as on the camps themselves. Youth are being prepared for church and ministry leadership as they grow personally and spiritually. The positive friendships and mentoring relationships that result from these programs play a key role in youth reaching their full potential as followers of Christ. The valuable skills in leadership and ministry they acquire at camp directly benefit churches. Camp Qwanoes data

⁵¹ George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church’s #1 Priority* (Ventura: Regal, 2003), 34.

⁵² Powell, Griffin and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

shows that many are ready to take on a variety of ministry responsibilities when going back to their churches in the fall, while many also go on to become pastors or to serve in significant ministry leadership roles. Leadership program participants at Camp Qwanoes have gone on to start significant ministries such as one focused on helping at-risk youth in East Vancouver.⁵⁵ Camp ministry and church ministry work hand in hand with each other and they are essentially one and the same: “The church and the camp are uniquely united; the camp is the church at work outdoors. The locale is different, and the methodology may change, but the purpose and power are the same.”⁵⁶

Churches are directly benefiting from the positive impact of being a camper or camp staff member on faith formation and maintaining that faith into adulthood. The *Renegotiating Faith* report found that those in the study who had been campers or staff at Christian camps were much more likely to attend church services at least weekly and stay integrated with Christian communities as young adults as those who had not attended camp.

Young adults who had been involved with Christian camps either as teen campers or camp staff were roughly three times as likely to connect with a Christian campus group and at least twice as likely to connect with a new church or parish after having moved out... they (Christian camps) help young adults to grow up and find their place faster and, significantly, to find that place *within* the Church.⁵⁷

The direct benefit churches experience from leadership program participants being equipped and inspired to take on a variety of ministry responsibilities, including vital leadership roles when returning to their communities, also can be seen in John Bowen’s study of former leadership training participants at Ontario Pioneer Camp. Of the 333 that responded to his survey, 251 (75%) claimed to be active Christians.⁵⁸ Bowen found that the 75 percent were “involved in an amazing range of ministries in their churches” from pastoral and other church ministry leadership roles to assisting with all types of ministry support roles. “These are people who give a great deal to the life of their churches.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Inner Hope Youth Ministries, Vancouver, BC, <https://www.innerhope.ca/about-us.html>.

⁵⁶ Lloyd Mattson, *Camping and the Church*. CCCA Focus Series No. 13 (Colorado Springs: Christian Camp and Conference Association, 2007).

⁵⁷ Hiemstra, Dueck and Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith*, 11.

⁵⁸ Bowen, *Growing Up Christian*, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 77-79.

When Goetz finished her Kaléo program year, she became a church youth leader. Now she serves as youth and communications associate at Westside Church in Vancouver. Goetz says,

As someone who works in youth ministry at a church, I count CIT as the beginnings of my youth ministry. When I tell people how long I've been in youth ministry, I say 10 years because camp ministry *is* youth ministry. I realized that I love mentoring teenagers through my time at Qwanoes. I think that some kids will go to camp programs and just have a memorable summer and maybe a few lessons. But some, like me, will realize that God is calling them to something greater and He'll use camp to do it.⁶⁰

Christian camps in Canada are directly benefiting from the training in the youth leadership programs. Many camps in Canada have found that the students they train in their leadership programs become key staff members. At Camp Qwanoes, leadership program graduates are having a noteworthy impact on the summer and year-round staff teams. Many return for one or more summers in crucial leadership positions. On the head counselling team at Camp Qwanoes in 2017, four of the six members were young adults that became Christians as campers at Camp Qwanoes and went on to take the leadership programs. Leadership program graduates are also playing key roles on the year-round staff team. Nine year-round staff members, most currently serving in leadership and management roles, completed youth leadership programs at Camp Qwanoes or other camps. Two of these staff members became Christians while attending summer camp at Qwanoes.

Evan Klaassen, who completed the three summer youth leadership programs at Camp Qwanoes and the Kaléo program, is now serving as the youth leader in his church and as an active volunteer at Camp Qwanoes while completing his university degree. Speaking of his experience in the youth leadership programs, Klaassen says,

Spending a part or all of your summer in a camp leadership training program is the best thing you could do with your summer. From the friends you make, to the hands-on training, and the close encouraging relationships you build with your mentors, it builds practical life skills in communication, leading by example, comradeship, excellence, and

⁶⁰ Goetz, Interview.

service. Teens come back home from leadership training programs asking how they can get involved like they were at camp.⁶¹

Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp in Alberta notes that the graduates of their Personnel In Training program (PIT Crew), designed for high school students, “have been some of camp’s most solid and dependable summer staff members and it is camp’s desire to see this practice continue.”⁶²

Response

Many churches are unaware of the benefits camp youth leadership programs provide to them. Knowledge of these benefits will help them to plan for the future.

According to Bowen, just over one-third (36.7%) of the active Christians in his study noted the long-term influence of their time at camp. One said that being in the leadership training program at Ontario Pioneer Camp “was a huge spiritual growth time at that stage in my life and at that time allowed me to stay within the Christian faith.”⁶³ Bowen further demonstrates that in addition to the decision to keep following Christ and growing spiritually, many of the former leadership program participants “have clearly become Christian leaders – in churches, in business, in the arts, at home, and in schools.”⁶⁴ Dunning writes, “Seeing that people’s lives can be dramatically transformed this way, Christian leaders should be actively looking for more opportunities to use adventure learning in their ministries today.”⁶⁵

Churches can intentionally use Christian camp youth leadership programs to reach and develop young leaders. Church leaders can encourage people in the church and community to give their children summer camp experiences in the years leading up to high school. Encouraging children to go to a summer camp with youth leadership programs is an important first step in having them attend the camp’s leadership programs when they are old enough. Many applicants for camp youth leadership programs want to share the positive impact they personally experienced at camp with others. A leadership program participant wrote in a Google review:

Words cannot describe how amazing this place is... The staff have this amazing love for kids and many come from all over the world, to

⁶¹ Evan Klaassen, interview with author, January 18, 2020.

⁶² Crowsnest Lake Bible Camp, <https://www.crowcamp.ca/camps/training-programs>, accessed January 16, 2020.

⁶³ Bowen, *Growing Up Christian*, 49-50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁶⁵ Dunning, *God of Adventure*, 64.

participate in the mission of making kids feel loved and valued. This year I'm planning on doing the CIT program, and cannot wait to hopefully give the same experience to my campers as my counselors have given to me.⁶⁶

Potential leadership program participants are motivated by the inspiration and encouragement they receive from the older youth they meet at camp.

Klaassen says,

I was a camper twice at Qwanoes before doing a leadership training program. I saw the CIT's leading activities and being cabin counselors, especially my own, and I knew I had to do the leadership training programs too; I wanted to be like them, to have the opportunities to serve, love, and lead others to Jesus.⁶⁷

While in these leadership programs, youth experience the further benefits of the training and discipleship provided in the programs.

Marv Penner describes the progression of leadership training and development that starts occurring when children first come to camp as participants and continues as they move toward becoming a young adult:

The shaping of a leader is actually beginning in the life of an eight-year-old whether they realize it or not. As the child grows and matures both personally and spiritually, they begin to recognize that they have a contribution to make. When they outgrow the role of camper, it is a natural step for them to be invited into a leadership development program. It's a natural step to assume a junior staff position, and then a regular staff position at each level being mentored by a spiritually mature mentor.⁶⁸

In addition to encouraging children to go to camp, churches can encourage and even assist their youth to apply to camp leadership programs. Church leaders who promote these programs on a regular basis and find ways to give them a profile in the church will contribute significantly to the likelihood of youth in the church participating. Churches also can be proactive in considering how to welcome their youth back when they return from camp. After having a leadership program experience at a Christian

⁶⁶ Google Review, Camp Qwanoes, 2019.

⁶⁷ Klaassen, Interview.

⁶⁸ Marv Penner, Interview.

summer camp, many are excited about their faith and eager to continue serving. If, due to their young age and beliefs people in their church may have about high school students, returning participants find that their church has nothing significant for them to do, they may feel disoriented. Churches that have plans in place to direct their youth into existing church ministries, or possibly encouraging and supporting them in some of their own ministry initiatives, will make a vital contribution to their continued growth and development as young Christian leaders.

Churches can encourage students making postsecondary plans to do a gap year program in a Christian setting before going on to college or university, other training, or entering the workforce. A gap year experience could keep students connected to their faith and committed to service in the church as adults. Some may decide to pursue further education for pastoral or church ministry as a result of these programs. Kaléo graduates have said they would not have completed their degrees at Briercrest or other Christian colleges or universities without first taking the Kaléo program.

The *Renegotiating Faith* report found that:

[t]hose who took a gap year, which was sometimes understood to be a one-year discipleship program, between high school and postsecondary studies were more likely to attend religious services as an adult, to have had a home church mentor, to connect with a new church after moving out of their parents' home and to connect with a Christian campus group.... Young adults who went straight into postsecondary studies fared worse on all our measures of religious persistence than those who had taken a gap year.⁶⁹

Churches that desire to encourage children and youth to have camp experiences and participate in leadership programs can invest in Christian camping. They can help subsidize the cost of camp fees for children and youth in their area. Churches can partner with camps to provide those in need with financial aid to attend and to be part of leadership programs. With partner churches, camps are stronger and in a better position to offer leadership programs. In addition to financial support, churches can give prayer support and encourage volunteer staff involvement at camps.

Churches supporting children and youth, their families, and camps will have current and eternal benefits as those in the younger generations form

⁶⁹ Heimstra, Dueck and Blackaby, *Renegotiating Faith*, 11.

their values and potentially move into church and ministry leadership and other roles. Barna writes, “If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world, you must invest in people’s lives; and if you want to maximize that investment, then you must invest in those people while they are young.”⁷⁰ Goetz says,

You never know what kid’s life will change because of that first week at camp. I got sponsored to go back to camp and eventually, I became a counselor and got to feed into other kids’ lives. It doesn’t stop with that ten-year-old. That kid is going to grow up to be something, to be someone. And maybe that kid’s going to have a story like mine. Because someone poured into me, I am here today.⁷¹

Churches that utilize the avenue for Christian leadership training and development provided by camp youth leadership programs are making a strategic choice that will have far-lasting impact.

Conclusion

Highly developed leadership training programs are being offered to youth at Christian residential camps across Canada and the results are having a significant impact on Canadian churches and ministries. The success of youth leadership training in the Christian summer camp setting reveals that these programs are a key resource for churches as they plan for the future and seek to move forward in the current culture. Because youth leadership training programs offered by Christian camps in Canada are strategic to reaching and developing young Christian leaders, churches that are intentional about involvement with them will make a vital contribution to the future of Christianity and Christian ministry.

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Bayley, Julie. “Camp Youth Leadership Training: A Hidden Resource for the Church.” Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved [Date Accessed]).

⁷⁰ Barna, *Transforming Children*, 42.

⁷¹ “Why Camp Matters: Holly’s Story.”