



The Network of Camps and Retreat Centers
Affiliated with The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Outdoor Ministry Trends, Challenges and Opportunities

As observed by Don Johnson, LOM Executive Director, 2015-2025

The world in which we live

- Conflicted, divisive, violent
- Continuing erosion of trust in and rejection of authority, institutions, and science; weakening of ties to tradition
- Globalization; nationalism
- Politically more and more radical
- USA becoming more racially diverse
- The issues that are of increasing importance, especially for younger generations: equity for all people; creation stewardship particularly in regard to climate change
- Governing jurisdictions are decreasingly apt to favor or trust religious institutions
- Consumerism is an increasingly dominant factor in the short-term and long-term life decisions of individuals. As a result, working on summer camp staff is an increasingly less attractive option for increasing numbers of young adults.
- Technology and sports are occupying enormous amounts of time and energy of all people, especially young people.
- People of all ages, particularly children and youth, are dealing with seemingly increasing issues of mental health.

The church

- Secularization is increasing
- Throughout all denominations and from one denomination to another, people are moving from an old style of religious practice to what is perceived as a new style.
- Mainline denominations such as the ELCA are experiencing a decrease in membership and attendance at a rapid pace.
- Even congregations that are non-denominational and evangelicals are experiencing a decline in their rate of growth.
- The “nones” (spiritual but not religious) are becoming an increasingly dominant segment of the religious landscape.

- Many people, especially young people, see much of the church as irrelevant or even hypocritical in regard to burning issues of our day – inclusion of those who are marginalized, especially persons of color, persons who identify as LGBTQ, and persons who live with disabilities; climate change and global warming; tip-toeing around polarizing issues and political positions.

The ELCA

- The number of congregations is declining
- The membership numbers are declining
- Worship attendance is declining
- The average age of those who attend church regularly is increasing
- Sunday School attendance is declining
- Youth participation numbers are declining
- The demographics of congregations are increasingly not aligned with their surrounding communities – especially as it relates to racial diversity and economic diversity.

Impacts on outdoor ministries

- Historically, the “feeder systems” for church camps of the mainline denominations, in general, and specifically for ELCA camps, has been congregations. Thus, the sole purpose of many of our camps has historically been to be “an extension of the congregation”. Given the trends that are noted here, camps that continue to relate solely to their constituent congregations are dealing with critical challenges with **participant enrollment and related revenue streams, donor engagement, and staff recruitment**.
- The participants in our camp programs are increasingly Biblically illiterate and unfamiliar with faith practices.
- For many people, the camp to which they feel connection is their primary religious community.
- Camps are sensing a need to engage staff who are professionally equipped to help those who are experiencing mental health challenges.
- Grandparents who have been faithful church members are upset with their children who are now “nones” and they are willing to pay for their grandchildren to have religious experiences like camps provide.
- The demographics of LOM camps’ leadership and participation are not generally aligned with their surrounding communities – especially as it relates to racial diversity and economic diversity.
- There are some who question the relevance of church camps because of the connection with the church, often perceived as intolerant of persons who are marginalized and avoidance of existential issues like climate change and global warming.

Factors that contribute to thriving outdoor ministries in spite of challenging trends

- Confidence in the mission as a uniquely Christian organization.
- Doubling down on church relationships (congregations, synod, churchwide) BUT also...Finding new partnerships in other denominations and the general community. Colleges, schools, civic groups, community organizations, environmental groups
- Welcoming diversity of all kinds, including denominational diversity. The aim is for the camp ministry to deepen the familiarity of all with the love and grace of Jesus and the importance for all to proclaim the Gospel, rather than to concentrate solely on the reinforcement of the faith formation of those who are already involved with our own denomination.
- Finding ways to involve all ages in the camp ministry especially as that is possible through intergenerational programs.
- Equipping camp leaders with the skills of conflict resolution, community-building, listening to others, practical faith practices, and the application of Biblical lessons to everyday life.
- Cultivating camp leaders from among those who are most passionate about their camp. Finding ways of keeping older youth involved in leadership development opportunities in the “gap years”. Excellent multi-week CIT programs are an essential part of such initiatives.
- Proactively including persons who have been historically marginalized as decision makers (Boards and committees) participants and staff leaders – persons of color, persons who identify as LGBTQ, and persons who live with disabilities.
- Practices and actions that “walk the talk” in regard to care of creation and environmental stewardship.
- Investing the dollars necessary for traveling day camps to truly represent the valuable resource that outdoor ministry can be and not just an inexpensive alternative to VBS. When done right, traveling day camps bring more campers to your camp, and can be an evangelism tool for the congregations where they take place.
- Staff who are engaging in the collaborative collective wisdom of colleagues. Camp leaders who take the opportunity, through LOM, ACA and other professional networks in which they all, working together, are there for each other in times of crisis, transition, or the need for particular expertise. Never has this been more crucial than during the pandemic.
- There is a planned, implemented strategy for the cultivation of donors.

Opportunities

- Camps have staff members who are experts in bringing people together for relationship-building and the experience of Christian community. Because these are skills that are important for building community among the church and non-church, there are opportunities here for camps to help congregations become re-rooted in their own neighborhoods.
- Camps have traditionally been “magnetic” in their appeal to children, youth, and young adults. This continues to be the case in spite of the lack of involvement of younger generations in other ministries of the church. Camps have an opportunity to keep people in the first third of life connected with the church and for many, to be the primary source of Christian Education and Faith Formation. There is opportunity for camps to partner with grandparents who, in many instances, appear to be more concerned about Christian Education and Faith Formation than the grandparents’ children who are the parents of the grandparents’ grandchildren.
- Institutions and traditional systems are being questioned and/or ignored. Camps have long been implementing experiential learning which has a way of transcending the traditional and institutional.
- Research has documented that for young adults serving on summer camp staffs, it is a time of intense vocational discernment including discernment of call to public ministry. For this reason, it is important that camps continue to collaborate with the ELCA seminaries for the sake of ongoing leadership for the whole church.
- For those whose primary faith community is their camp, there is an opportunity and a responsibility for the care of individual spiritual needs beyond the time that such persons are at camp.

And, as we continue emerge from the grip of the pandemic, there is an intense need for all people to feel connected...to God, to the natural creation, to each other. All of which camps are ideally suited to be central to meeting this need. *“We live in a time when things valued in the past, like socializing, playing games together, hugging, shaking hands and even something as simple as physical proximity have become a source of anxiety and fear. We need to reintroduce these skills and experiences (lest they be lost) in the safest framework that we can, because these are the things that truly connect us together!”* - Martin Williams
There’s no better place than camp to be reintroduced to these skills.

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot know the ending, by paths yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen! – LBW, Morning Prayer, p. 137