



Re-Establishing the Focus of a Non-Profit Organization: A Spiritual Youth Camp in Transition

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Abstract

This report focuses on the re-establishment of narrowly defined emphasis within a non-profit organization. The non-profit organization, a spiritual youth camp, offers illustration for how this re-establishment can be accomplished. The reader will see how this illustration progresses through key variables and highlights varied sub-considerations. As such, there are clarifications offered that consistently reinforce the benefits of re-establishing focus during the life of an organization.

I am part of the leadership of a non-profit organization and we very much need to re-establish our focus. The non-profit organization is a local community church camp. My involvement with the local community church camp began in the summer of 1966 when I spent a week as a camper at the camp sponsored by the church where my family had been long term members. I was ten years old. I found considerable meaning in the camp experience and have been part of the annual weeklong camp every year since that time. My participation has progressed from junior camper, to senior camper, to cabin counselor to pastoral staff with varied functions blended into these levels of experience. The significant spiritual renewal and interpersonal relationships that exist for me at camp have been at the core of my personal evolution.

My participation has allowed me to observe relevant camp dynamics that help to frame the experience. These first-hand observations have enhanced my understanding. In preparing this report I have sought to review sources from different time periods to better understand how the concept of residential youth camps has evolved. As such I have recognized the camp experience as a relevant social science phenomenon. "The Christian summer camp experience makes multiple measurable impacts on campers and camping ministry deserves attention from academic scholars."¹

It is an interdenominational camp that meets at a state park in southern Ohio. Campers come from all over Ohio and surrounding states. I have attended each summer since 1966 so this has allowed me to grow my missional sense in a manner that has been commensurate with the missional nature and vocation of the church as manifested in the church camp. An overall objective of the camp is to provide a setting for the camper (ages are 5th grade thru high school

graduate) to have a spiritual experience that can serve as a means for greater self-awareness and appreciation for their self-potential. The camp session generally includes about 180 campers and 70-80 staff (counselors, cooks, & support staff).

No religious denomination is promoted and the religious backgrounds of camp participants (campers & staff) is varied. Visiting clergy have included religious leaders from a variety of faiths such as Jewish, Catholic, Congregational, Community, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and others. The camp is commonly described as being spiritual but not denominational. The camp leaders describe this phenomenon as "we want Catholics to go home better Catholics, Presbyterians to go home better Presbyterians, non-Christians to go home better non-Christians, etc."

A goal at the camp is to break down barriers to self-expression. Since campers are ages 10-18, peer pressure influences are particularly strong and these peer pressures can greatly inhibit self-expression. Thus, steps are taken to create an environment that rewards genuine sharing and discredits typical peer pressures (i.e. judging others by their clothes, physical appearance, language usage and racial/ethnic background). Campers typically come to the camp with a set of peer pressure oriented norms that staff seek to dilute. The result is usually a normative vacuum that allows more spiritually oriented value norms to evolve. "Taking a child—or yourself—out of a daily routine and allowing them to experience nature and worship in new and different ways helps them to be open to spiritual ideas and formation."²

Singing is a unique part of the camp experience. The simple act of singing together perpetuates a singular collective camp spirit. A unified voice is realized. This type of bonding

1 M.Manlove, "Review of 'Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camp in Theological Perspective,'" Christian Century (March 9, 2022), 40.

2 H.G. Gary, "Happy Campers," In Trust (Summer, 2021) www.intrust.org

has been described in other camp settings. “The heart of LSU (Lutheran Summer Music) was making music and living in community. . . . The spiritual dimension of community played a large part in this formation.”³

The camp can’t teach doctrine because there are too many denominations represented amongst the camp community. A general goal is that we are striving to help all participants be better people and to respect each other. As stated earlier, we “want Catholics to go home better Catholics, Presbyterians to go home better Presbyterians, non-Christians to go home better non-Christians, etc.” In past years over 40 churches have been represented at the camp but this number dropped off due to declining church attendance in the U.S.

Campers and staff come from a wide range of backgrounds and, even with all the diversity, participants come looking for “safe-haven” from the challenging pressures of school, family and trying to understand themselves. Campers share their feelings and consistently console one another in a manner that creates an almost surreal camp-wide comfort zone. Dedication to the group and respect for the individual is consistently stressed. Thus, although there are conflicts during the course of the week, the camp is frequently referred to as “heaven on earth”, “the way things ought to be” and “my favorite week of the year where I can get away from the world”. A camper from another camp summed it up with “Camp is a way to get away from our troubles. But this break from reality can’t last forever.”⁴

Campers, rather than staff, typically serve as speakers at religious services throughout the week. Speakers will often share revealing thoughts they have about themselves and their lives. They receive unconditional support from the camp. This phenomenon breeds more and more self-disclosure from speakers throughout the week. The realization that individuals can share their weaknesses, insecurities, dreams and aspirations, and not be ridiculed, has a very positive effect. That they will receive support from the group is almost intoxicating. “Camp is messy. . . . It is about providing space for relational encounters and interactive play. . . . The purpose of the activity is the process itself. Theologically, this is known as discipleship.”⁵

It is within this stress on campers speaking at religious services that the missional nature and vocation of the camp is accentuated. That is, the focus on campers results in campers taking ownership of their faith development. This has been a part of the evolution of my own missional awareness starting from my youth and continuing into adulthood. This has benefitted my guiding of campers in that I have experienced the camp phenomenon from the perspective

of a camper. “Christian camps locate this powerfully tactile experience in the context of Christian faith teachings and practices. . . . opportunities for young people to reimagine life itself as caught up with and dependent upon God and to rethink the nature of sanctuary.”⁶

Many of the camp activities are a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves. There are a variety of sports classes and outdoor activities (i.e. swimming, fishing & hiking). The goal is not to produce greater athletes or catch big fish, rather it is to provide a climate that promotes fellowship among campers. Each cabin creates a stunt (skit) for Stunt Night. The goal is not to develop acting skills, it is to promote cabin unity and stronger interpersonal relationships. Songs are sung in many of the camp settings throughout a typical camp day. The goal is not to produce excellent singing voices, it is to produce a unified chorus of the collective camp mind. “Camp is a setting where non-routine experiences have the possibility of capturing the imagination; leading a young person to greater openness to the Holy Spirit.”⁷

The camp improves the sense of self and sense of others. The camp since its inception has consistently stressed interaction among diverse groups in American society. Diversity exists among campers and staff in areas such as racial & ethnic composition, economic classes, religious background, staff occupations and residential locations (i.e. urban, suburban, & rural). The camp leadership actively sought to integrate the camp (racially & ethnically) in the early 1960’s by establishing relations with churches that have populations different than the home church. The first black person and Jewish person I met, as an example, was at camp at age ten.

Camp is frequently described as being “special”. I interpret the “specialness” as being linked to the camp environment that allows for interaction relatively free of societal inhibitions.

This allows for the spiritual sense of self to be more evident and individuals will interact with one another in a more uniquely genuine manner. The collective mind of the group is strong and it builds upon itself.

Camp provides a unique environment for growth of the individual via growth of the group. Measuring the effects of this growth is very difficult because, while some changes are immediate within an individual, other changes will not occur until much later. Spiritual seeds can be planted at camp that do not come to fruition until long after the camper has left camp. Understanding the constructs of such a spiritual experience is the first step toward measurement. One intention of this report is to serve as a contribution to that preliminary understanding and, as such, it is a statement of the missional meaning that I desire to pursue and this

3 J. Baker-Trinity, “The Gift of Lutheran Summer Music,” *Cross Accent* (Fall/Winter 2017) 477. www.alcm.org

4 H. Kendzor, “Finally a Camper,” *Teen Ink* (September 17, 2020) www.teenink.com

5 J. Sorenson, “The Logic of Camp in Christian Education,” *Theology Today* (Vol. 76, No. 1) 2019, 61.

6 J. Sorenson, “Rethinking the Classroom: The Logic of Camp in Educational Ministries,” *Word & World* (Vol. 38, No. 1) Winter, 2018, 67.

7 B. Williams, “Theological Perspectives on the Temporary Community/Camping and the Church,” Unpublished Manuscript. Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College, 2002, 5

missional objective is nested within the missional nature and vocation of the group as manifested in the camp. This is tied to the re-establishment of the focus of the organization.

At first glance our camp would seem like a common church camp but my involvement with the camp has exposed me to how it is far from common in some fundamental ways. The camp was founded as a ministry of our local community church in 1956. The founding directors were Karl & Dorothy Taylor. They held this position for over 50 years. When they stepped down their son (Paul) and daughter-in-law (Lynda) took over as directors. Paul and Lynda had performed integral functions with running the camp prior to their taking over as directors. During the past five years Paul & Lynda have stepped down and their daughter (Mary) took over as director. The camp has always been a Taylor family endeavor. I am using pseudonyms for the names of individuals in this report.

A significant pivot for the camp occurred in 1986 when the camp broke away from the founding community church and became an independent entity. The long term minister who had helped establish the camp in 1956 was unseated from his position in a messy ordeal and the new minister sought to assert his leadership role with the camp. The Taylor family rejected his assertion and removed all camp functions from the church. The camp has been held at a state park since 1970 and they changed the name to the Friends Community Church Camp. In the course of one day the camp went from being a non-profit organization to being a for-profit venture. The name change had little impact on the functioning of the camp and the camp continued in line with what had gone on in the past.

This was a seismic shift regarding legal status but the change was barely felt among the camp participants. The same people were in charge and the same activities and organizational culture was in place. However, as an adult, I was aware of the financial rearrangement. Karl & Dorothy had a struggling business venture they had been seeking to stabilize and they merged the camp with their family business. Camp funds were mingled with their family business funds. One would think there would be complaints about this development among the staff but it did not happen. Things pretty much continued on as they always had regarding camp functioning and that appeased most participants.

In 2012 one of the (non-Taylor family) leaders of the camp spearheaded a move to legally establish the camp as a non-profit entity under the auspices of us being able to better position ourselves to receive donations. The Taylor family cautiously went along with this. It was apparent this would also mean they would lose much control of the financial functioning of the camp organization. We were granted non-profit status in 2012 and started a process for restricting how we handled our money internally and externally. This did not include a system of "checks & balances" but there was at least a sense there should be such a system.

There have been four other events that have occurred in a relatively short amount of time that have prompted a re-establishing of the focus of the camp organization: 1) the aforementioned passing of the formal leadership for the camp to Mary that happened in 2022, 2) the inheritance of a large amount of money by the camp organization in 2022, 3) the COVID pandemic in 2020-2021 and 4) the deaths of the founding directors between December, 2019 and January 2023. The camp withdrawing from the church in 1986 forced a re-establishment of the focus of the camp organization because it abruptly transitioned from being a non-profit entity to a for-profit entity and the achieving of non-profit status in 2012 also forced a re-establishment of the focus of the camp organization. However, these significant transitions were spread over a lengthy period of time and that allowed the organization membership to absorb the changes in a less abrupt manner that minimized the impact of the changes. However, these four changes I have listed in this paragraph occurred in a 25 month window of time. They represented significant change that happened in a relatively short amount of time.

There has never been very much money associated with the camp since it began. In 2021 the camp organization had about \$20,000 in savings that we worked from as a base each year regarding the running of camp operations. This all changed in 2022 when a wealthy camp alumnus (Rob Duncan) died unexpectedly and left \$384,000 to the camp. This has generated considerable interest in the financial functioning of the camp organization. Our camp director (Mary) functions as the president of the camp organization and her father (Karl) functions as the treasurer. There is something of an informal system of "checks & balances" within the camp organization but the relevant individuals are daughter and father from the same family.

The executor of Rob Duncan's estate has asked me to obtain a full reporting of the bequeathed amount annually regarding expenditures and status of the funds. I serve in that capacity. All parties involved agreed this annual reporting would occur in October of each year. I contacted Mary (camp director/president of the camp organization) in October, 2023 with a request for this initial reporting and did not receive a response without significant prodding from me. The potential for some type of audit to occur looms in my mind. I have memories of her grandparents being repeatedly audited by the Internal Revenue Service in successive years in relation to the tax filings associated with their business concerns. There is potential for Mary not to fully realize the relevance of participating with such record keeping based on her family's practices with such matters.

This issue is ripe with interpersonal context. Rob Duncan was a longstanding friend of mine from camp. We were campers together. We have our grave plots together. I feel a special obligation to assist with this checks & balances issue. The Taylor family has put countless hours into running the camp since 1956, which the camp community greatly appreciates, but they are accustomed to being able to run the camp with

no interference from outside of their family. That is the unspoken tradeoff among the staff. The non-profit status is both embraced and rejected. They welcome the money that is more readily donated but seem to reject the checks & balances that goes with such a tax-free status.

The founding directors, Karl and Dorothy, died within a 25-month period. Karl died in December, 2019 and Dorothy died in January, 2023. Their passing served as bookends for the four significant changes I highlighted earlier that prompted a re-establishing of the focus of the camp organization. It seems understandable that two old people that were failing in health over the years would eventually die but their passing still came as a minor shock to the camp organization. They were such strong leaders that their presence, even when they were old and frail, seemed to keep us all marching to the drum beat that they had established. Practically all of us had been young campers at the camp at one time and adherence with their dictates was an intuitive reaction. They guided us with a parental orientation and that never really faded over time. After they both died it seemed to cement the idea that we were on our own to function as we saw fit.

COVID impacted camp much like it did other segments of society. We met as a camp in 2019 and then did not meet again as a camp until 2022. There were three years passage of time. We launched a half-hearted attempt at a virtual online camp session in 2020 that basically featured online speakers but it understandably had limited participation. A worthy effort but minimal impact. Then a group of staff went down to the camp facility for a week in August, 2021 to have a meeting of the minds and discuss camp planning for the future. No campers were there so it was basically just a staff session of sorts. Worthwhile but not significant in the life of the camp community.

I found that the three years between camp sessions served as time for individuals to re-evaluate their views of the camp and what we were working toward and for the collective camp mind to reflect on our past, present and future. The campers returned to camp three years older. Three years is not much in the life of an adult but for a child it can represent a significant shift. The campers returned with enthusiasm. COVID was waning and being back at camp represented some degree of return to normal living. With their overall maturation came a more mature camp regarding the perspectives of the returnees. The new younger campers did not have the benefit of prior years at camp that would have normally occurred but did not because of COVID. So we had something of a void within the program.

The August, 2021 staff gathering at the camp site allowed time for the attending staff to discuss who we are, how we are organized and how we will function in the future. The more significant of these conversations occurred around a daily camp fire we had each evening. A topic that was implied but not mentioned was how we will handle our money. Money did come up indirectly as an issue during some sidebar conversations but basically the group did not address it. I was

in a couple small conversations where there was mention the camp director might become a paid position. This drifted to consideration that if the camp director was paid then the head cook in the kitchen should be paid. This opened the door further about what other positions should be paid. Ultimately, nothing came of such discussion but it was the first time I ever heard such mention of paid positions within our camp staff. To me it illustrates the role of Rob Duncan's sizeable bequeath to camp in relation to the fact we never had enough money to pay staff until we came into possession of his money.

The overall lesson from what I have conveyed in this report thus far is that the camp organization, as a non-profit entity, needs to re-establish the focus of the organization with regard to laying out a plan for who we are, how we are organized, how we will function in the future, who we will serve and how we will handle our money. It would seem that we could sit down together in some sort of retreat meeting, discuss these matters and come to agreement regarding how to proceed. I don't think it is that simple in practice though. I noticed during our evening camp fires when the more significant conversations occurred that participants had difficulty expressing themselves in clear terms. There was much emotion present. Long standing disagreements that had been simmering beneath the common level of awareness periodically surfaced. There were tears and trembling voices. Some people left for periods of time and then returned.

I found that we had difficulty coming to common agreement regarding what our problems were and from where they came. This inhibited our being able to move toward resolution. I have come to believe our camp participants care deeply about the camp but that there are varied understandings having to do with who we are as a group and what we are seeking to achieve. It is exceedingly difficult for us to know what directions we should seek to proceed in when we are not altogether clear on where we are.

The project I will implement in our non-profit setting will be to address the issues that have been emphasized in this report. This will involve consulting the membership about the need for such a dialog and then seeking input with regard to how we should proceed. This will involve small groups meeting to discuss key issues and then coming together as a larger group to deal with these matters. We will need to have a meeting facilitator who has the trust of the larger group. Such a process will benefit from Adaptive Leadership that has an appreciation for future possibilities. "All too often young leaders become servants of what is rather than shapers of what might be."⁸ The Adaptive Leader will have knowledge of the past, awareness of the present and vision for the future.

The Adaptive Leader will seek to cultivate an Adaptive Culture. There are five distinguishing characteristics of an adaptive culture: elephants in the room are named, responsibility for the organization is shared, independent

⁸ R. Heifitz, A. Grashow, & M. Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2009), 52.

judgment is expected, leadership capacity is developed, and reflection & continuous learning are institutionalized.⁹I should clarify that “elephants in the room are named” means that any subtle meanings or moods that are perceived in the environment will be acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored because they are uncomfortable.

Embodied Learning offers a path for the Adaptive Leader to pursue. “Embodied learning enables you to take actions previously unavailable to you and to know what right action to take in a given situation because you upgraded your inner operating system yet again.”¹⁰ It equates with being open to modifying your mindset so it is receptive to recognizing new developments and giving consideration for how what might initially be perceived as a challenge may be embraced as an opportunity.

When the Embodied Learning approach is employed by the Adaptive Leader this can lead to the group achieving a Growth Mindset. “Unlike a fixed mindset, in which one acquires and adds new knowledge to an already existing way of making sense of the world, a growth mindset transforms and expands the mind by stretching it, challenging it, and evolving to a more expansive level of complexity.”¹¹ This can require a leap of faith but the continual rewards will reinforce the benefits realized.

At times this process can seem like it is two steps forward and one step back. It can be counterintuitive. The *Walk Out Walk On* book shares “The culture I was raised in taught me to solve problems, pursue success, maximize profit, gain influence, leverage power, and be compensated well for doing so. . . . For many Walk Outs, for me, there comes a stage of paralysis. How can I make a contribution when I know that the familiar ways don’t work—that success often comes at the cost of other people’s lives and livelihoods.”¹² Thus, the direction I am suggesting in this report can be both exhilarating and disorienting for us individually and collectively.

That is when we can realize the benefit of community. “Whatever the problem, community is the answer. There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about. Only when we turn to one another do we discover the wisdom and wealth that is so abundantly present in us, our

9 Ibid, 165.

10 C. Johnson, *The Leadership Pause* (Nashville, TN: Braintrust Ink, 2022), 109.

11 Ibid, 132.

12 M. Wheatley, *Walk Out Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (San Francisco: Barrett-Kohler Publishers, 2011), 232.

traditions and our environment.”¹³The resulting frame of reference concurrently offers meaning, hope and resolution via awareness that we (individually and collectively) have more control over our destiny than we might typically think.

The end result is that we find ourselves at a place of empowerment. There will be an awareness that God guides us not as some external entity but as a force that walks with us. Our minds will be open to possibilities and potentials via God’s light that is shone. We will come to recognize how the guiding hand of God will make itself known to us not as an abstract force in the sky but via the people we encounter on a daily basis. There can be no greater re-establishment of focus for an organization.

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- 13 Ibid, 224.

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