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(page 14)

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Study guide

100 years of inspiring faith

Camps and retreat centers shape leaders

By Robert C. Blezard

At 100 years old, Lutheran Outdoor Ministries (LOM) is hardly showing its age. It's as active as ever in bringing people into the presence of the holy, forming the faith and raising up leaders for the church.

Exercise 1: Your LOM experience

Over LOM's 100 years, countless thousands of Lutherans have experienced fellowship, fun, joy—and spiritual depth—at outdoor ministry sites. What about you? Have you visited a LOM ministry or other Christian outdoor ministry? As a study group share:

- What is your favorite camping memory?
- What was your most enjoyable moment? Least enjoyable moment?
- Did you experience hardship at camp?
- What was your most laughable moment?
- What was your most spiritual experience?
- In addition to giving you good memories, what impact did the outdoor ministry have on your life? How did it change you?

Exercise 2: Local ministries

Research the LOM sites in your synod or region at elca.org/camps. Have study group members or teams of members research different sites and report on them. (If your synod or region has no LOM sites, expand your search to Christian camps and ministries affiliated with our full communion partners.)

- Which outdoor ministries are within driving distance of your congregation?
- What programs and activities do they offer?
- What facilities are there for recreation, lodging and dining?
- What age groups do they serve?
- Which activities or programs would seem most relevant to your congregation?
- Do members of your congregation participate in their programs? If so, how? How often? What has been the experience of those who go? If they don't participate, why not? Is your congregation missing out on something?
- Does your congregation support or partner with any outdoor ministry? If so, how is it beneficial to both congregation and outdoor ministry? How might your congregation deepen the partnership? If they don't support it, why not? How might a partnership be beneficial?



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Study guide: **100 years** *continued*

Exercise 3: Renewal in nature

It's no secret why our nation's parks and wildlands are so popular. Whether it's walking in the park, paddling a canoe on a lake, hiking up a mountain or stargazing into a clear, dark sky, just being in nature gives people a lift.

Prepare for the study session by reviewing research into the effect of nature on human mood and health. Using an internet search engine, type in "the health benefits of nature." Dozens of reputable sources reveal the scientifically proven ways that being in nature improves health in body, mind and spirit. Share the information with the study group. Discuss:

- Science has shown that it's part of human nature to respond positively to being in natural surroundings. How has that been part of your experience? Your congregation's?
- Nature comes in many "flavors": seashore, forest, mountain, desert, lake, river, plains. What's your preferred "nature escape"? Explain.
- Share a time when being in nature had a dramatic effect on you.
- Would you describe the effect nature has on people as "spiritual"? Why or why not?
- Some people call natural settings "God's country." Is this an apt description? Why or why not?
- In what ways do outdoor ministries channel people's innate response to help develop their faith?

Exercise 4: "Nature deficit disorder"

You likely won't find "nature deficit disorder" discussed in a medical journal, but researcher, author and speaker Richard Louv has popularized the notion that many behavioral and emotional problems can be linked to alienation from nature. Children today, especially, are susceptible to nature deficit disorder because of the lure of electronic gadgets and protective parents who might keep children inside rather than romping in nature. (For more information, use an internet search of "nature deficit disorder.") Discuss:

- What outdoor activities do you enjoy? Why? How do they make you feel?
- Do you go outdoors as much as you would like? Explain.
- Do you go outdoors as much as you did in the past? Why or why not?
- Do you think you might suffer from nature deficit disorder?
- How might your life improve if you spent more time in nature?
- When you were a child, how much time did you spend playing outside? How did this impact your development into a healthy adult?
- By contrast, how much time do children (perhaps your own children or grandchildren) spend outside today? What are the reasons for this? What effect does this have on their development into healthy adults?



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Study guide: **100 years** *continued*

- How can outdoor ministries help adults and children fight nature deficit disorder?
- With its added faith-formation component, how can outdoor ministries help children, youth and adults attain better spiritual health?

Exercise 5: Spiritual refreshment

The Gospels repeatedly tell us that Jesus would leave the crowds and the cities and withdraw to the wilderness to pray (for instance, Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16 and 6:12).

- In his prayer practice, what is Jesus modeling for us?
- What is it about getting away to some natural setting that is especially conducive to prayer?
- Can you share a time when you experienced especially refreshing prayer while in nature?
- In bringing people into prayerful connection with nature, how do outdoor ministries help people experience this connection to God?

Exercise 6: Church in the woods

It's unlikely you'll find a pipe organ, choir loft or narthex at a LOM site, but you will find music, singers and plenty of gathering space. And the experience of worship and fellowship will be different. Explore:

- What are typical worship spaces like at a Lutheran camp? How do they differ from regular church? What special benefits can camp worship spaces offer?
- Church services typically use a formal liturgy out of a hymnal, such as the *Lutheran Book of Worship* or *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. How is worship different at an outdoor ministry? What do those services offer to a worshiper?
- Describe the difference between camp worship music and church worship music. What are some positive points?
- The point of any worship service is to bring the congregant into the presence of the holy—to open up a space in the worshiper's heart and soul for the Spirit to work. How does a camp worship experience do this in ways different from worship at a church?
- Though outdoor ministry worship is often geared to children and youth, do adults enjoy it and find the experience enriching? Explain.

Exercise 7: Leadership development

Like Jim Hazelwood, bishop of the New England Synod, thousands of Lutherans testify that an outdoor ministry experience was foundational not only to their faith development but also to their eventual decision to choose a church vocation.



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Study guide: **100 years** *continued*

- Do you know any rostered ministers, youth workers or other church leaders who have had critical experiences at camp? What are their stories? (Better yet, invite them to tell their story to the study group!)
- What is it about outdoor ministries that moves people to take on a church vocation?
- How well do congregations understand outdoor ministries as a training ground for future leaders? How can the church deepen that understanding?
- How can congregations better partner with outdoor ministries to develop talented leaders and bring them into church vocations?

Exercise 8: Faith formation

Children, youth and adults alike find that outdoor ministries invigorate their spirit and provide faith formation. For each of the elements of a typical outdoor ministry experience, discuss how they contribute to faith formation:

Intentionality: People participate in outdoor ministries for lots of reasons, but the underlying purpose is to have an experience of the holy. And outdoor ministries offer a lot of activities, but they all support the purpose of bringing people into the presence of the sacred.

- What differentiates an outdoor ministry from scout camps, sports camps and other experiences?
- What difference does that make for its participants?

Fellowship: We all have circles of friendships and relationships, and we travel in those circles for different lengths of time and for different purposes. Camp gives us an opportunity to spend time with fellow followers of Jesus.

- What differentiates your interactions with co-workers and friends from those with people you spend time with in church camps?
- How much time do you typically spend with friends and co-workers in a given month? What difference does the length of time spent together in outdoor ministry lend itself to deeper friendships and quality interactions?

Setting: Outdoor ministries not only gather participants in a setting apart from their everyday lives, but also bring them into contact with the natural world.

- Generally, what are the benefits of physically “getting away” from work and home?
- Psychologically, what are the benefits of “getting away” from everyday routines?

Wrap-up: What conclusions can you draw about the effectiveness of outdoor ministries on faith formation, leadership development and other important areas of ministry?



100 YEARS OF INSPIRING FAITH

Camps and retreat centers shape leaders

By Stephanie N. Grimoldby

James Hazelwood didn't grow up in the church. Still, the directors at El Camino Pines, a Lutheran outdoor camp north of Los Angeles, took a chance on this "unchurched guy," as Hazelwood said, and hired him as a summer camp counselor in 1980.

"In my first week, I found myself surrounded by fourth-grade boys," he recalled. "Rather than I teach them, they taught me the Lord's Prayer."

That summer, Hazelwood discovered more about not only Christ, but himself, including leadership gifts he didn't know he had. He was baptized that August.

"Five years later, still thirsting and hungering for a deeper connection to God, I entered seminary

at Pacific Lutheran [Theological] Seminary in Berkeley, Calif.,” Hazelwood wrote in a reflection about his call to ministry. “Later, I was ordained, and then after 25 years of parish ministry, I was elected bishop in New England.

“I would not be in the Lutheran church, nor serving as a bishop, had I not been given the opportunity to work as a summer camp counselor at one of our Lutheran camps. It allowed my gifts to flourish, and it allowed the Holy Spirit to do her work in and through me.”

That’s the power of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries (LOM), a professional organization for leaders of camps and retreat centers affiliated with the ELCA that is celebrating 100 years of ministry starting this July.

Each year, more than 175,000 children attend LOM summer camp programs, and off-season retreat and conference participation reaches 300,000, said Don Johnson, executive director of LOM. Summer camp staff and counselors number 3,500.

There are endless stories like Hazelwood’s that begin with a formative week at camp and end with a vocation somewhere in the church, Johnson said.

Ralph Yernberg, who spent 32 years in outdoor ministries as director of several camps and later as co-president of LOM, agrees. The ELCA is also full of lay leaders who attended camp and now volunteer teaching Sunday school, encourage family

ministry, and are open to change and diversity in congregations, he added.

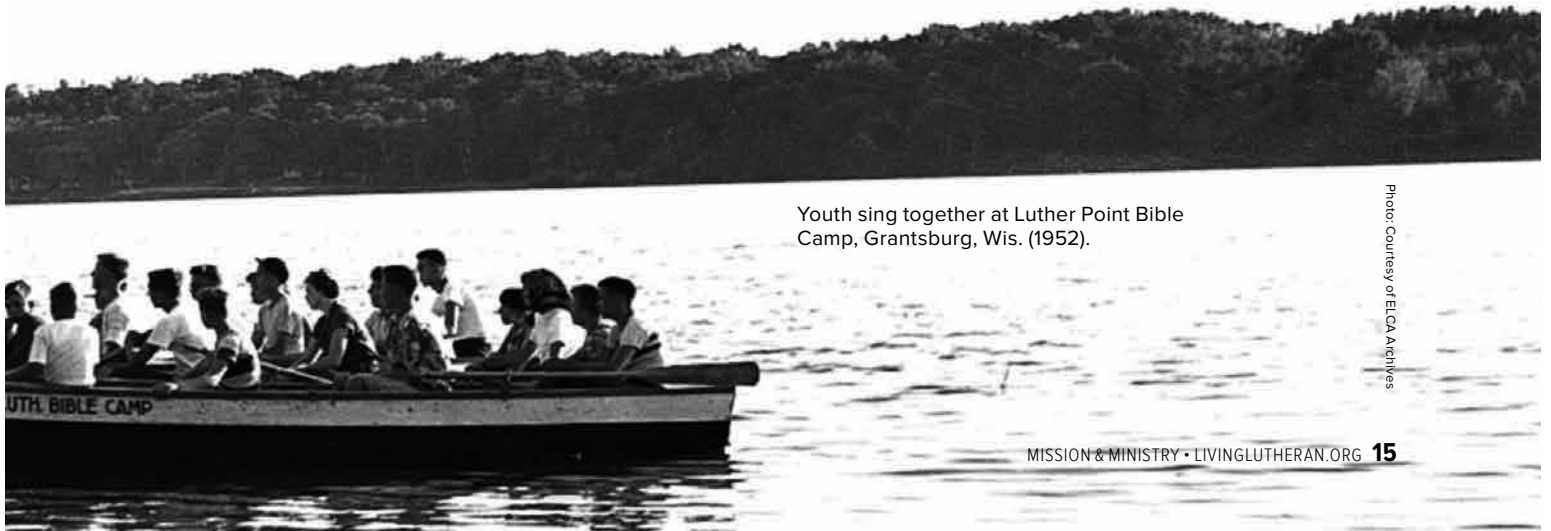
Often that leadership is sparked during a week of camp. “Kids have a chance to learn about their identity as believers,” Yernberg said, “where they sense community that offers them support and encouragement, where they just have this freedom to explore their faith in a way that seems to make sense to them.”

In the past century, LOM has played a vital role in shaping Lutheran leaders for church and society. Here’s a look at the legacy of this long-standing ministry.

The first Lutheran camp

In technical terms, Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Inc. was formed in 2005 as a free-standing nonprofit. But LOM as a ministry, supported by the former Lutheran Church in America and American Lutheran Church, and now the ELCA, has a 100-year history rich in service.

Right after the turn of the 20th century, the country was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. The Fresh Air Movement also was taking place—a call to get people out of dirty cities such as New York, Minneapolis and Pittsburgh, “places where factories were literally cranking black smoke out of their chimneys, and steam locomotives were probably at their peak,” said Mark Burkhardt, ELCA director for faith formation and a former director of outdoor



Youth sing together at Luther Point Bible Camp, Grantsburg, Wis. (1952).

Photo: Courtesy of ELCA Archives



"Luther Leaguers" at Long Lake Bible Conference grounds in Long Lake, Ill. (1923).

ministries whose master's thesis is titled "The History of Lutheran Church Camping from 1919 to 1949."

In 1915, Ambrose Hering, a Lutheran pastor and superintendent of the Pittsburgh Inner Mission Society (now a Lutheran Services in America affiliate), first proposed the idea of a Lutheran summer camp to provide fresh air to inner-city women and children working long hours in the polluted air.

But it wasn't until four years later that his expensive dream came to fruition. "WWI was

the war that was going to end all wars—that was the belief," Burkhardt said. "So, immediately at the end of WWI, the U.S. government put up for sale massive amounts of equipment: beds, mess kits, large tents and so forth. This pastor jumped

on it, and

that made it possible to start the first camp outside of Pittsburgh [using] WWI surplus army equipment."

A Lutheran layperson, Sidney Passavant, agreed to provide free use of his

property along the Connoquenessing Creek at Zelienople for camp use. Located 28 miles north of Pittsburgh, it was easily accessible by public streetcar and had space for swimming, boating, fishing, exploration and hiking.

On July 5, 1919, Camp Wa-ba-ne-ki officially

opened. (Johnson said this is the official day LOM selected to begin a year of observing this anniversary.) In 1919, one week at Camp Wa-ba-ne-ki cost \$5, with an additional \$1 for transportation, Burkhardt wrote in his thesis.

The camp's first summer received mixed results, but any negativity was short-lived. "Once word got out that this social service agency in Pittsburgh had finally launched a camp, within just a few years, there were Lutheran camps popping up all over the country," Burkhardt said. "The desire to get kids out-of-doors, [provide] a Christian education, connect with youth—the idea caught on like wildfire. Within 10 years, there were 20 to 25 or more Lutheran camps across the U.S."

After WWII, another dozen or so camps were built. "That came about as soldiers returned, and they had seen things all over the world," Yernberg said. "They had lived in camps, so some looked like army barracks, with cabins in straight rows ... [the Lutheran camps] had names like Luther Memorial [to honor veterans]."

From 1965 to 1980, Lutheran camps saw significant changes. Summer youth programs slowly began to expand to year-round; unheated cabins gave way to heated facilities for families; the focus on youth shifted to all age groups; and volunteer staff became paid staff.

In the 1980s, day camps were created, and during the last three decades, camps exclusively designed to facilitate mission trips and work trips—like Habitat for Humanity builds—have become a vital part of LOM.

"It's profound what's happened," Yernberg said of those changes. "In my mind, the philosophical underpinnings is called service-learning education. It's where you learn about people and about problems and about solutions to the service you provide in under-nurtured communities."

Camp today

Today, 91 organizations are affiliated with the ELCA, with 121 camps and retreat centers making up LOM, Johnson said. The upper Midwest has the largest



Luther League women attended lectures and Bible studies and enjoyed rowing across Long Lake (1923).

Photos: Courtesy of ELCA Archives





Numbers tell the story

In addition to testimony, there's research-based evidence that substantiates the influence of outdoor ministries.

Jacob Sorenson, director of Sacred Playgrounds, an organization that performs research and training to support camps and congregations, has conducted numerous surveys and studies to determine the impact of one week at summer camp.

"Many people critique summer camps and say it's just a 'spiritual high' that quickly fades or a mountaintop experience, but you have to come down from the mountain," he said.

After surveying more than 5,000 campers in 13 states and Canada, plus an additional 1,400 parents, Sorenson reports in "Effective Camp Findings" in 2017 that while not everyone has a life-changing experience at camp, more than half of all those who attend experience lasting impact.

"We discovered there is indeed something called a 'camp high': ... increased positivity, greater zest for life, more happy and joyful [attitudes], but they don't last [longer than] a few days or week after camp is done," he said. "Horizontal faith—faith that is relevant in my daily life, that is reaching out to the world around me ... increases and has lasting impacts months following camp."

Between a half and two-thirds of campers showed measurable results in areas such as self-confidence, social skills, leadership, church attendance, devotional practices, etc.

concentration, with Minnesota leading the pack with 20 and Wisconsin adding another dozen.

Each camp is unique not only in location and the environment it offers—campers could be kayaking in beautiful lakes or hiking through the mountains—but also in terms of constituency served and programs offered.

Still, there are commonalities that are important to the Lutheran camp model: faith formation, leadership formation, and community and relationships, Johnson said. "If there's anything in common with any of our outdoor ministries, it's being very intentional of gathering people together in order to impact them in the way their faith is being formed," he said.

Similarly, most camps try to provide a community where people can truly explore and discern God's call on their life—and not just those called to be ordained.

"[There are former

campers] leading nonprofit organizations in the world, people serving in civic responsibilities, people who seek elected positions and seek to make a difference in ... how they provide leadership, people in helping professions: nurses, doctors, teachers ... there's a lot of emphasis in all of our outdoor ministries [regarding] helping people discern where God is calling them to serve," Johnson said.

Through all of this, Lutheran camps strive to be safe havens for



Augustana Synod Luther League youth unload suitcases at camp (1952).



Camp stays helped Lutheran youth appreciate nature, build friendships with their Lutheran peers and grow in faith (1952).

Youth receive mail from home while at camp (1952).

Photos: Courtesy of ELCA Archives/ Illinois Conference of Augustana Synod Luther League



campers, not only physically but emotionally, theologically and spiritually, he added.

Why camp works

As a pastor's kid, Louise Johnson never thought she would want to follow a similar career path in ministry as her father. Then she became a counselor at Camp Mowana, Mansfield, Ohio.

"I just loved the opportunity to be with and interact with junior high girls—that was my group," she said. "It was such a privilege to walk with them

in the wilderness to "get away," she sees it as more than that: "It's a kind of environment that upsets our rhythms in such a way that makes you take stock of how you do spend your time and reframes how you might spend it, in community with other people in faith, in the beauty of the outdoors, in a regular rhythm of life with God."

What camps do is remarkably simple, in a ritualistic kind of way, Yernberg said, adding, "You get up in the morning; you don't lay in bed. You go to breakfast. You have devotions. You, sometime during the day, gather around God's word. Most



From the 1970s to 1985, Lutheran camps began adapting their facilities to serve all ages year-round. To express this broader service, camps became known as outdoor ministry centers, said Ralph Yernberg, former co-president of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries.

and connect with them in community with other camp counselors and be able to have an impact on their lives. And you can see that in the course of the week. They had had an experience not only of Christian community but, more significantly, an experience with God. And that, to me, that's the part I really fell in love with and the part that made me think again of ministry as a vocation for myself."

Louise Johnson went on to work in youth ministry and then attend seminary. For the past four years, she's been president of Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. "I don't think I ever would have done that without the experience of camp," she said.

What is it about camp that shapes the future of campers' lives? While many describe it as a place

of the time, you end the evening with God's word or the ritual of a campfire. And all these things have a way of adding up ... through some very simple activities. It's repetitive."

Yernberg was once told that a week of camp is the equivalent of five years of Sunday school. Just picture the campers who enjoy seven or eight summers of camp, following those same rituals of daily prayer and engaging in faith talks, he suggested.

The future of LOM

It's hard to predict where LOM's future lies, Yernberg said. But outdoor ministries have been shaped by current social movements—and have tried to respond to them—so it likely will follow a similar pattern.

That could mean that camps try to play a larger role in addressing climate change issues (some already use wind power and super insulated buildings) or amp up their work toward social justice through mission trips, the hiring of international counselors and working with retention facilities, all things camps have done for years, Yernberg said.

Burkhardt said LOM is poised to play a major role in the ELCA's two current priorities: leadership development and congregational vitality.

education, Louise Johnson thinks outdoor ministry could be one of the best training grounds for leaders tasked with growing congregations. "Oftentimes, we put seminary students in well-oiled machines of congregations, but I think what they miss is what it means to articulate the faith to someone who doesn't have that background," she said. "There are tons of people on the fringes of faith. [Seminarians have to] learn how to engage the conversation with someone who's not already convinced. The gift of outdoor ministry is that there's a place ... not called church. For those allergic to that notion, it gives us a whole new opportunity to engage a life of faith in a different venue." 



Photo: Courtesy of Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp, Lakeside, Mont.



Photos: Courtesy of Badlands Ministries, Medora, N.D.



ELCA outdoor ministry centers continue to play a vital role in the faith formation of Lutheran youth—and adults—today.

He said camps can strengthen the personal growth work they're doing with middle-aged and older adults—not just children—and encourage them to ask significant life questions: What kind of contribution do I want to make to society? How can I be a better neighbor?

And congregations could more fully use outdoor ministries to stay healthy. "Congregations that engage in other ministries like outdoor ministries are the ones that are healthier," Burkhardt said. "They're getting out of their local church, mixing it up with people from other places, taking advantage of spiritual growth opportunities and, as a result, they're more vital and healthy than congregations that don't take advantage of those opportunities."

As a proponent of change in theological

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