

Camping Sunday Service Celebrating Camping Ministry

Sunday, April 26, 2009

Today we are joining in the celebration of United Church camps. We invite you to join together in this time of story-telling and reflection to renew our call to silence the chaos in our lives and re-enter the Spirit's call from the wilderness that houses camps across our United Church. Camps are a temporary community, and churches are permanent communities. Today, we focus on how we can work together as communities to share God's love.

Gathering

Call to Worship

One: In the midst of our busy lives,

All: We know that you, God, are with us.

One: In the midst of laughter and joy,

All: We delight in knowing you are with us.

One: In times of grief and struggle,

All: We are comforted and strengthened in knowing you are with us.

One: At home, at worship, at camp, at work, among family and friends,

All: We rest in the knowledge that you are with us.

Thanks be to God!

Hymn: "Draw the Circle Wide" (MV 145)

Opening Prayer (by Karen Bridges and Shauna Gibbons)

**All: Creator God,
we hear your wilderness cry
from the depth of our souls
and long to answer.**

One: We seek you out in the silence and beauty of nature,
in the sound of the birds,
the rustling trees,
the lapping water,
and the crunching of branches.

**All: Our eyes and ears are opened to your presence
in the newness of day, the brisk air,
and the colours of the sunrise.**

One: Be with us in this time of storytelling and memories,
guiding us along the forest's edge into oneness with you.

**All: May we follow faithfully the footsteps of Jesus
in this and all the paths of our lives.
Amen.**

We Listen for God's Word

Children's Time

Before the service, gather a number of items: stones, water, tree branch, a leaf, a flower, sand, a Bible, etc. Place the items in a backpack or some kind of carrying case you'd use in the outdoors. Hide the pack somewhere near the front of the church. Tell the children you have something you'd use to carry things when you go camping, hidden near the front of the church, and ask them to find it. Once found, invite each child to reach inside and take one item, then ask them to think about how that item reminds them of God. Invite the children to share their answers.

God can be found in many places and ways in the world around us. At camp, we take the time to enjoy the world around us, to spend time with campers and develop new friendships, and to look for God in the world around us and in other people.

Can you think of other things you might find at camp, that weren't in my backpack, where you could find God? (*birds, animals, insects, friends, laughter, a hug, the sun, the moon, rain, stars, etc.*)

Where can you see God here in church today? (*mother, father, friends, music, Bible, etc.*)

Ask the children to close their eyes, and say:

Imagine you're at camp, sitting beside a stream. Listen to the sound of the water as it trickles over the rocks. Feel the breeze and the warmth of the sun. Remember that God's Spirit is in YOU—and in everything you do and say, you can share God's love with those you meet.

Camp Reflections (*share a PowerPoint show from your local camp if available*)

Scripture: Psalm 8

O God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Gospel: Luke 6:47–48

I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built.

Hymn: “Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness” (VU 375)

Message:

There is no ordinary camp. There is no ordinary child. There are only the countless miracles God provides daily, waiting to be noticed and appreciated and packed into our hearts.

From east to west and north to south, across six time zones, and over two million lakes, boasting the longest coastline of any country, Canada is home to 64 United Church camps.

From the coastal coves and rainforests of the western coast, to the ocean currents and Grand Banks of the east. From the Rocky Mountains reaching up to the western sky, to the headlands and cliffs of the Cape Breton Highlands.

From the fierceness and majesty of the Yukon, and the rocky region of the Canadian Shield, to the Great Lakes Lowlands and the endless fields of wheat under a never-ending sky. United Church camps dot the landscape across this beautiful country.

Our camps welcome everyone, regardless of race, class, gender, orientation, or faith tradition.

Our camps are beautiful and diverse, offering people of all ages adventure, faith discovery, and community.

We are thankful for all our camps, nestled in the beauty of nature, in peaceful and quite settings, where we can reflect, discover, and grow while having fun, playing, and laughing in community.

Today we are joining in the celebration of United Church camps. The gift of camp is the opportunity and space to recognize that every minute of every day we are in relationship: relationship with one other, relationship with creation, and relationship with the divine, and with this comes responsibility and connectedness. We have been called into partnership. The precious gift we celebrate today is our rich history of supporting spaces and places in our church whose sole purpose is to reconnect us with our souls and the Spirit that nourishes us.

Historically, camps grew out of camp meetings where people of all ages came together for teaching, spiritual renewal, and transformation. Camps were initiated by local groups of people who understood the benefit and blessing of renewal and recommitment in a temporary community setting, away from the busyness and routines of life. For over 50 years before Union (1925), Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational/Union churches established camps in various parts of the country, not in a centrally planned way, but in response to the Spirit leading them to create these ministry opportunities.

Since 1925, camps have been an important part of the ministry of the United Church. For the past 83 years, United Church congregations have supported the creation, development, maintenance, and ongoing growth of camps. Every year anywhere from 18,000 to 25,000 people of all ages hear the call of God and are nurtured in faith at our camps. Multiple generations of families have attended our camps. While many people will never find their way into a church, camps bring the church to people. Camps are “the church at work outdoors.”

Today, The United Church of Canada has 64 residential camps across the country, supported by hundreds of congregations and individual members who serve as board members, directors, program staff, youth counsellors, chaplains, nurses, cooks, maintenance staff, and many other volunteer and staff roles.

While the United Church has never conducted a survey to discover the exact number of current church members and leaders who attended a United Church camp, there are statistics available from other denominations that reveal camps to be key turning points in people’s faith journeys and as settings where they gleaned important leadership skills. Kevin Witt, Director of Camp and Retreat Ministries for the United Methodist Church,

says that hand-raising at events such as annual conferences, training sessions, and so on, often results in 60 to 80 percent of the group indicating that they have been involved in and were positively impacted by camps and retreats. This mirrors organized research done by the Presbyterians, who discovered the same for more than 70 percent of their leadership.

A former United Church camper, now a ministry leader, writes: “My United Church summer camping experience taught me the breadth of God: the magnificence of God in nature, and the intimacy of God in community. I learned that real joy comes from the balance of mind, spirit and body, and camp is the only place I know that lives out this ideal.”

In the words of a young camper from the east coast: “Okay, okay, I know what you’re think’n. Why do I want to go to a Christian camp that will just talk about God all the time? Well, at this camp we do talk about God and stuff but the good thing is—they make it fun for you!”

Our camps provide a number of unique programs and opportunities, including:

- summer camp programs for children, youth, families, and seniors
- retreat opportunities for congregations, presbyteries, and Conference offices
- campsites for individuals, groups, and families
- rentals to local businesses, community organizations, and school groups

Church camping is a ministry of evangelism and outreach to people of all ages and all backgrounds. Our camps offer:

- focused time in inclusive and welcoming communities
- recognition of personal gifts that benefit the community and the church, and opportunities to exercise those gifts in community
- holistic ministry and programming that combines the body, mind, and spirit
- safe and focused time connecting to the beauty and wonder of God’s creation
- leadership development opportunities
- models and mentors for young people to follow
- opportunities to build wholesome relationships
- opportunities to experience a “Sabbath” from the demanding schedules and social expectations of our daily lives
- supportive communities that provide concentrated time to identify and work on needs easily hidden in the home community
- a vision of Christian community for the camper to pursue at home—learning how to become a part of a healthy community in their local church

But what happens to campers when they return home? Who nurtures the seeds of faith growing within them? The partnership between our local camp(s) and our congregation underlies an amazing, long-term system for the development of faith and spiritual leaders. We fulfill our ministry far more effectively by working together than in isolation.

What can we do to strengthen our partnership with our local camp(s)?

- Encourage children, youth, and adults to participate in Christian camps and retreats and create ways to be aware of who attends from our church and community.
- Develop ongoing strategies for welcoming those who return and provide opportunities to hear about the highlights of their experiences. Show that we care by celebrating what is important to them.
- Be intentional about incorporating meaningful aspects of the camp/retreat experience into the local church setting to build on the seeds of faith that have been planted.
- Participate in camp events and develop partnerships with camp staff. Living together in Christian community for an extended period of time at a camp opens many doors.
- See camp ministry as an important extension of our own congregation's ministry. Get involved and support our camp(s) with our prayers, presence, service, and our gifts. Watch lives change before our eyes as they become open to the moving of the Spirit in these special settings.

The real test of camping ministry is what happens back home where a camper must live out what was learned at camp. That's where we come in! Our congregation is the practical means of maintaining the spiritual momentum begun at camp. We are builders together with camps, digging deeply and helping to lay the foundation of campers on solid rock.

Hymn: "May the God of Hope Go with Us" (VU 424)

We Respond in Joy and Faith

Sharing of Camp Memories

Ask for a show of hands of people who have attended a United Church or other camp. Invite people to share their memories from camp. Welcome stories from those who attended United Church camps, and those who attended other types of camps. Be open to stories that reflect warm and wonderful memories, as well as those not so positive.

Prayers of the People (based on A New Creed, adapted from the Camping Standards Manual, *The United Church of Canada*, 2007)

All: We are not alone, we live in God's world.

One: You are present in the world and in our lives; Your activity and loving hand is made known to us through the beauty of creation and through the people around us.

All: We are called to be the church at camp: to celebrate God's presence...

One: We actively share in you, rest with our thoughts, discover the spiritual benefits of silence, solitude, contemplation and rest. In the faces of those around us, in the stillness of quiet moments, we celebrate your presence in the world. Camp provides time for us to just be, to listen and meet you in the struggles and joys of community.

All: We are called to live with respect in creation...

One: We eat, cook, and clean together, work and learn together, disagree and laugh together. We swim in lakes and seas, gather around fires, walk in woods, and gaze at stars. In creation and community we discover that you are a life-changing God.

All: We are called to love and serve others...

One: We are a ministry of the United Church that touches the lives of thousands of children, teens, young adults, adults, and seniors every year. We meet you at camp, experience healthy community, and deepen wholesome relationships. We receive from you a vision of Christian community to pursue, and tools to assist us in becoming a part of a healthy community.

All: We are called to seek justice and resist evil...

One: As campers we learn while engaging in acts of service according to the gifts you have given us. We learn to care for creation in practical and sustainable ways.

All: We are called to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope...

One: We are committed to Christian education programming, in an environment where your loving presence can be celebrated and shared. At camp we receive not only the biblical story to inform our story, but also opportunities to put our faith into practice. At camp we find concentrated and uninterrupted time together with mentors and counsellors who can guide us in the process of growing in our relationship with you.

All: We are the church living, moving, and breathing, celebrating your presence together at camp, in creation and community.

The Lord's Prayer

Offering

Offertory Hymn: "For the Gift of Creation" (VU 538)

Closing Prayer (*from Celebrate God's Presence, United Church Publishing House, 2000, p. 526*):

Gracious God, you are so good to us.
Today we offer a prayer of thanksgiving

for all of the blessings revealed to us
through Christian camping and outdoor ministries.
For the gifts of your good creation,
which we encounter when we are camping:
for forests and fields, beaches, streams and lakes,
sunrises and sunsets, wind and rain,
we give you thanks, O God.

For your gift of time and the cycle of nature;
for opportunities in the out-of-doors to reflect,
and to feel your presence very near to us;
for rest and recreation,
we give you thanks, O God.

For the dedication of countless people
who have supported this ministry
through offerings of time and talent:
builders, counsellors, and instructors;
for the gifts of all who create and maintain
an environment of faithfulness and healing
through their example at camp,
we give you thanks, O God.

For the blessings you make known to us
through those who participate at camp;
for the questions and discoveries;
for the friendships and fun;
for the music and stories,
we give you thanks, O God.

**Bless, O God, the ministry of camps and retreat centres,
a ministry which is ours in Christ's name.
Amen.**

Closing Hymn: "I, the Lord of Sea and Sky" (VU 509)

Benediction