



The Role of Christian Summer Camp Staff Experiences in Faith Formation and Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT: The Christian summer staff experience remains largely unexplored, in spite of its strong record of success in developing faith and forming leaders in the church. A 2021 survey of over 800 staff members from 50 Lutheran camps in the United States offers valuable insights into the role of a summer camp staff experience on faith formation, personal development, and vocational call. Three factors impacted growth: support, agency, and consistency of faith in the camp community. The camps involved in the study were inconsistent in these three areas. Camps that were stronger in these areas employed staff that exhibited consistent growth in leadership and self-confidence, along with many staff showing increased interest in serving in professional ministry. Camps that were weakest in these three areas had staff that showed declines in many of these outcomes, including belief in major Christian tenets and regard for the church..

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTIAN SUMMER CAMP is an integral part of faith formation and leadership development in the church. Until recently, this observation was based largely on anecdotal accounts and limited qualitative inquiries. However, a steadily increasing body of research has demonstrated that summer camp programs are consistently successful in achieving youth development outcomes that last months after camp, including such things as independence, self-confidence, affinity for nature, and leadership skills.¹ Christian camps have similar outcomes

to the larger summer camp movement, but comparison studies have shown that they add unique outcomes like faith in God, participation in Christian practices, and identification with the Christian community, along with stronger indicators for some outcomes in comparison to secular camps, such as empathy/compassion.² Studies focused on Christian camps demonstrate that they show evidence for consistent, lasting outcomes on faith salience and Christian practices,³ with impacts related to identification with Christian community lasting at least five years after the camp experience.⁴ While most Christian camp experiences last a single week, there is an additional dimension of summer camp that remains understudied: the experience of the emerging adult summer staff who spend the entire summer in the camp environment. The summer staff experience is an opportunity for emerging adults to develop strong Christian relationships, serve in a meaningful ministry role, and explore their identities as disciples called into specific vocations.

Since its emergence in the late 19th century, summer camp has been part of the ecology of faith formation in North America. In the early days of the movement, only expensive private camps employed college-aged young people to serve as camp leaders, while religiously affiliated camps, particularly those tied to the major Protestant denominations, tended to rely on adult volunteers or adventurous clergy members to lead overnight camp programs. This changed in the years following World War 2, when the Christian camping movement saw dramatic expansion and the increase of college attendance enabled a near ubiquitous staffing model that relied on college students dedicating their summer break to serving at camp. This led to the familiar model of college-aged camp leaders (or counselors) leading small groups of 8-10 young campers in experiences involving multiple nights away from home in a highly interactive, relational, faith-centered program. By the early 21st century, there were more than 2,000 Christian summer camps in the United States alone, representing almost a quarter of all summer camps.⁵ Together, these camps served over 1.5 million overnight youth campers during the summer months and employed over 75,000 seasonal staff each summer.⁶

The summer staff experience remains largely unexplored, in spite of the clear potential of the camp environment to directly address the most pressing spiritual needs of emerging adults identified in multiple studies such as the National Study of Youth and Religion,⁷ Kinnamon's work at Barna,⁸ and Setran and Kiesling's examination of emerging adult ministry.⁹ Three key factors in emerging adult faith formation that all of these studies hold in common include

the importance of relationships, genuine internalization of the faith, and incorporation of faith practices into daily life.¹⁰ These three major factors of emerging adult faith formation align remarkably well with the three major elements of the summer staff experience enumerated in this study.

Several small studies have consistently demonstrated that seasonal summer staff view the experience as broadly impactful and unique. They describe the summer-long camp staff experience as “the camp bubble”¹¹ and “a liminal space,”¹² emphasizing the temporary, set-apart nature of the experience that facilitates identity exploration, personal growth, and even transformation.¹³ A small longitudinal study isolated some of the unique outcomes of camp employment, in comparison to school and other work environments, especially identifying relationship skills, leadership, and appreciation for being present in the moment as consistent outcomes.¹⁴ Importantly, this study provided evidence that camp employment was perceived as more valuable for career readiness among those on certain career paths (especially teachers) than others. This finding begs the question of whether employment at religiously affiliated camps have outsized impact on staff on a path to professional ministry. Other studies have shown that skills gained as camp staff are directly applicable and transferable to later work environments. None of these studies examined staff at Christian camps, and their sample sizes were quite small. The only large study dedicated to Christian camp staff focused on workplace readiness, with limited consideration of the unique characteristics of Christian camping and outcomes related to faith formation.¹⁶ However, this study identified characteristics of the camp staff experience that facilitate growth, such as a healthy staff culture and consistent support from supervisors, elements considered in the present study, alongside the faith formation factors.

Emerging adulthood itself is a relatively new life stage, brought about by a delay in reaching the traditional societal markers of adulthood, such as financial independence, starting a family, and completing formal education. This has lengthened the average time between adolescence and adopting adult responsibilities, at least for Western nations and other developed nations. New opportunities and societal expectations have filled the gap, creating the new life stage. One illustrative example is the concept of the “gap year,” which encourages young people to set aside an entire year of their life prior to beginning their career, oftentimes in the middle of their undergraduate college experience, to gain new life experiences. There are now entire programs at camps, service organizations, and travel organizations structured to appeal to emerging adults taking a gap

year. Jeffery Arnett characterizes emerging adulthood with five characteristics: the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, a self-focused stage of life, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.¹⁷

There are two stories of decline highlighting the need for faith formation and vocational discernment among emerging adults. One is the general decline in faith observed among emerging adults and the other is the decline in active clergy members in the church. These factors are closely related. A decline in faith commitment has long been a feature of the late adolescent and young adult years, but Wuthnow demonstrates this decline has become much more pronounced in more recent age cohorts, compared with those who came of age in the 1960s or 70s.¹⁸ Pew Research confirms this finding in the Religious Landscape Study, attributing much of the decline in religious affiliation to generational replacement, with younger age cohorts far less religious, on average, compared with older age cohorts.¹⁹ As emerging adult religious commitment declines, fewer young people are discerning a call to professional ministry. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem of clergy burnout,²⁰ accelerating the crisis of clergy shortage, which even the national media noted.²¹

The alignment of the major elements of summer camp with the unique spiritual needs of emerging adulthood make it a key space to address these two crises. Furthermore, serving on summer camp staff offers an extended experience lasting eight to twelve weeks for emerging adults to learn and grow together, while actively engaged in ministry practices. The questions for the present project are, therefore: In what ways and to what extent does the Christian summer staff experience contribute to emerging adult faith formation and vocational discernment? What are the best practices to replicate at other camps and in partnership ministries?

METHODOLOGY

THE CAMP AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP PROJECT explored the impact of working on summer camp staff on personal faith formation, congregational involvement, and church leadership. In order to conduct multi-dimensional analysis, it focused on a single denomination: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The study proceeded in three phases. First, researchers conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews in spring 2020 with former camp staff who

were now serving in church leadership. Church judicatory staff of the six ELCA synods in Wisconsin helped identify these leaders. Half of the interviewees were rostered clergy members and the other half were lay leaders serving in a variety of roles. There was an even split between male (13) and female (11) interviewees and more than a 40-year age spread, from the mid-20s to late 60s. Nineteen of the interviewees were married, including seven who met their spouse at camp. Researchers recorded, transcribed, and coded each interview to identify major themes and sub-themes. The findings directly informed the development of questionnaires for the surveys of clergy and summer staff. Most specifically, the phase 1 findings made clear that the summer camp staff experience functioned alongside a variety of other ministry experiences in its influence on faith formation and call to ministry. Any examination of the camp experience, therefore, would have to assess the relative impacts of these other ministries and experiences.

The second phase of the study was an online survey of the entire roster of ELCA clergy members, including pastors and deacons. In response to the findings from phase 1, the questionnaire assessed the frequency of participation in sixteen distinct ministry experiences from childhood through emerging adulthood, examined alongside religious service attendance and perceived impact of faith influencers. The questionnaire then used branching logic to assess the perceived importance of each identified ministry experience on the respondent's personal faith formation and call to ministry. The ELCA churchwide staff distributed the survey on behalf of the researchers, and leaders at the synod level promoted the survey to ensure high participation rates. Two incentives were offered: individual respondents were entered into a drawing to win gift cards and the three synods with the highest response rates were offered free individualized data reports. The survey was distributed in both English and Spanish. It garnered 3,041 responses, representing 18.1% of the entire roster spread proportionally throughout the regions of the ELCA. Responses came from each of the 65 synods, with no synod having a response rate under 11%.

The third phase of the study was a survey of summer staff serving at camps affiliated with the ELCA in 2021. This survey used a test-retest methodology to measure change from the beginning of the summer to the end of the summer. All camps affiliated with the ELCA were invited to participate, which involved distributing the two surveys to staff members in either electronic or paper format. All participating camps were offered a brief summary of data from their staff respondents. Summer staff who participated in both surveys were entered for a chance to win a gift card. Only adult staff were eligible to participate, resulting

in the disqualification of 8% of respondents who were under 18. The resulting data set included 880 summer staff from 50 camps (representing about half of all ELCA-affiliated camps), including 517 with matching pre-camp and post-camp surveys. Researchers analyzed the data using various statistical methods.

FINDING 1: THE INTERCONNECTED MATRIX OF FAITH

IT WAS CLEAR that the summer staff experience functioned as part of an interconnected ecosystem of faith-based institutions and other life influencers. The conclusion that camp does not function on its own is not a new insight, but it is only recently being explored as an important consideration in camp research. In particular, ACA's 2017-2022 Youth Impact Study asserted that camp must be understood as part of a larger ecosystem of growth and learning. The research team noted early in the study that camp functioned alongside home, school, church, and other youth development spaces. While it sometimes functions as the primary learning space for a developmental outcome (such as affinity for nature), camp more often serves a supplemental role, with most participants seeing other spaces as more important to the development of certain outcomes (such as relationship skills, which were more often developed primarily in school).²²

In the present study, it was clear that the particularity of individual faith and life stories affected each person's experience and how the experience was integrated into their life after camp. One former staff who later became a pastor recalled, "I remember seriously crying about not wanting to go home. [Camp] was so beautiful and my home life was a disaster." Meaningful relationships, childhood experiences, previous camp experiences, and faith background all shaped an incoming staff member's expectations and experiences in the staff community. Every former staff member put the experience in context, describing how it contributed to their faith formation and vocational narrative alongside other factors. For some, it was among the most influential experiences in their life, while others noted a more limited influence at a particular time of life. One pastor reflected, "Campus ministry was a lot in the head, camp was a lot in the heart, and there was kind of a synergy between the two that really worked well for me in those years." Participants noted that the experience came at a pivotal time of their lives, when they were transitioning from youth to adulthood and

determining their life direction, values, and vocation, observations consistent with the emerging adult literature.

Camp also became a part of their own story. Throughout the interviews, former staff members shared stories and memories, oftentimes lost in the reverie of the experience. Many described ongoing connection to the camp, such as returning for various functions, sending their own children or supporting other children who wanted to attend, and supporting the camp through volunteer involvement or financial contributions. Some explained how they used the camp model and other camp wisdom in other contexts, particularly congregations they served. There were also those who felt disoriented after camp, struggling to move on from what they characterized as a powerful experience. Some of them despaired of finding a camp-like community again, leading to negative judgments on other forms of community and expressions of Christianity. This was also seen in the staff survey and will be explored further below.

The interconnected matrix of faith factors was clearly demonstrated in the 2020 survey of ELCA clergy. The influence of the camp staff experience was clear in the simple fact that 40% of all ELCA clergy had served on summer camp staff. Even more compellingly, among those who served on camp staff, a resounding 78% indicated the experience was very or extremely important to their faith formation and 74% indicated the same about their call to ministry. In both cases, this was a higher percentage than any other widely available experience included in the survey.²³ However, the staff experience did not stand on its own. Almost all of those who identified the summer staff experience as particularly important also identified numerous other experiences, such as mission trips, Sunday school, and church retreats. The inclusion of so many ministries allowed researchers to isolate those of particular importance to a large number of clergy and those that had independent effects relative to one another on call to ministry.²⁴ Among those included, four were particularly impactful on faith formation and call: participation in Sunday school, camp experiences (particularly serving on camp staff), attending the triennial ELCA Gathering designed for high school youth, and involvement in college campus ministry. These four functioned as keystone ministries that had the most substantial impacts on clergy members, though it was clear that they functioned alongside one another and a host of other ministries in a complex matrix of mutually reinforcing ministries.

The 2021 survey of summer staff confirmed that they came in with a wide variety of life experiences that impacted their camp experience. The most obvious were demographic differences. Staff were disproportionately white (90%),

reflecting the lack of racial diversity in the ELCA as a whole and meaning that people of color were small minorities in most staff communities. Almost a quarter of staff (24%) identified as LGBTQIA. Aside from demographics, staff had varying levels of familiarity with the camp. About half (52%) had served on camp staff in a previous year, so they came in with those expectations and experiences that their colleagues did not. Almost a third (31%) had never been a camper at the camp at which they were working, while half (49%) were campers five or more times. Three-quarters were enrolled in college (including 16% enrolled at an ELCA college), while most of the others were fresh out of high school or still in high school. Of the college students, roughly half participated in campus ministry, ranging from occasional involvement to leadership.

The vast majority had considerable faith background, with 88% attending Sunday school monthly or more as a child and 84% experiencing the rite of confirmation. However, while most staff (71%) grew up with connection to the ELCA, the remaining staff were raised in another Christian tradition or a non-Christian home. Faith practices in the home varied widely, with about half (55%) saying they had conversations with their family about God and faith at least monthly, while 63% indicated they almost never prayed with their family at bedtime. Just over half (53%) had been on an overnight mission/service trip at least once, and 40% had attended the triennial ELCA Gathering designed for high school youth.

In addition to various experiences, staff came into the summer with different self-perceptions and convictions that shaped their experience. While most had considerable church experience, their level of belief and faith commitment varied. Quite tellingly, only 81% agreed that they believe Jesus rose from the dead and only 80% agreed that God created the world. Even smaller percentages agreed that faith in God helps them in daily life (68%) and that the Christian church is a force for good in the world (58%). While these are all clear majorities, it was evident that many camps had substantial portions of their staff who were unsure or did not believe in some of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. This impacted staff outcomes and individual experiences at a camp-wide level, as we will explore below. This also indicates that some staff were on a vocational journey heavily influenced by their faith (including some with the intention of working in professional ministry), while others were not.

In addition to moderate levels of faith, many staff came in with serious mental health concerns. There has been a widely-documented rise in mental health concerns among adolescents and emerging adults in the early 21st century, including increased depression, anxiety disorder, and loneliness, among

other concerns.²⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated these challenges, as was clear in the summer staff survey. Over two-thirds of incoming staff (69%) reported feelings of overwhelming anxiety at least monthly, and almost a third (31%) reported having thoughts of self-harm at least a few times in the months prior to camp. A third (33%) agreed with the statement, “I am oftentimes unhappy about my life and who I am.” These feelings and self-perceptions complicated their experience in a job that was oftentimes stressful or exhausting. Not every camp provided adequate support for their staff members, and this greatly impacted their experience. The lack of support was due, in part, to camps being short-staffed in 2021, and they were also unprepared for the sheer number of staff members experiencing mental health challenges during the pandemic.

All of these factors and many more impacted staff members’ stories, perceptions of faith/God, and readiness for their role at camp. These unique individuals with particular life stories then impacted the staff community in which they were embedded for the summer. They joined other unique individuals and mutually influenced one another.

FINDING 2: THREE MAJOR ELEMENTS OF THE SUMMER STAFF EXPERIENCE

INTERVIEWS WITH PAST STAFF MEMBERS revealed three major elements of the summer staff experience: a set-apart community united by common purpose, experiential leadership, and openness to experiences of God. The summer staff survey confirmed the importance of these elements and indicated that breakdowns in these areas dramatically altered the quality of the experience and impacts. While breakdowns happened at the individual level, they were also measurable on a camp-wide level, demonstrating that each summer staff community functioned as an interconnected system.

The summer staff experience at each camp began with a period of intense training, usually lasting between one and two weeks, during which the staff members lived on site at the camp without other camp participants present. This training period set the tone for the entire summer, serving to forge community among staff members, establish trust, and develop a shared mission/vision. The training period was broadly, though not universally, successful in 2021. Looking back at the end of the summer, 77% of responding staff agreed that after staff

training, they felt prepared and empowered for their role during the summer. Their sense of preparedness depended heavily on their sense of connection with fellow staff members and identification with the mission/vision of the camp. A remarkable 87% of respondents indicated at the end of the summer that they were confident their tasks fit in with the mission of the camp “often” or “always.”

Staff spent an entire summer living and working together, allowing an extended, though temporary, time for challenges and relationships to play out. The temporary nature of the experience allowed for freedom to try new things (including new identities) and also highlighted the community as set apart and special. Staff shared in the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of camp ministry. This shared struggle generally forged deep relationships, as staff members supported others and experienced grace when they needed support. In the staff survey, 88% of respondents agreed, “When I was feeling down, exhausted, or not at my best, other staff helped and supported me.” At its best, the community was a safe space built on trust and shared vulnerability. This allowed individuals to be authentic with one another and accept one another’s differences. Diverse backgrounds of staff members facilitated openness to new ideas and feelings of acceptance. Conversely, when diversity and personal differences were not accepted, it degraded the experiences. As one former staff member put it, “In reflecting on camp, I feel like that was the first time in my life I really experienced what Christian community was, and that’s been something that, ever since then, I’ve been seeking out in my life.” Among responding ELCA clergy members who worked at camp, 91% indicated that camp was, for them, “a place of acceptance and affirmation.”

This element aligns with a major finding from other studies of emerging adult development and religiosity. Namely, peer relationships are essential for emerging adult development and instrumental in faith formation. Smith identifies “relational modeling and support” as the most important factor for sustaining religious commitment and practice during the emerging adult years.²⁶ This includes mentorship and peer relationships, both of which are prominent in the camp staff experience, as emerging adults learn from supervisors, model the faith to campers, and practice the faith with one another. The degree to which the camp programming emphasizes faith formation and the personal commitment of fellow staff members, therefore, greatly impact the faith forming environment.

The second major element of the experience was experiential leadership. One pastor and former camp staff member put it this way, “We were being equipped for leadership instead of just being taught something that hopefully

you took home and regurgitated at some point. You had to use those skills pretty quickly; you had a short turnaround.” There was a sense among former camp staff that they were plunged into leadership. Though they did not always feel ready, they were given the responsibility of teaching and leading a group of young people. In other words, they learned that they could lead by actually leading. This confirmed findings from a study of camp staff in Canada that found participants grew in their leadership abilities to the degree with which they were entrusted with responsibility and given leadership roles during the experience.²⁷ Being thrust into leadership meant a lot of learning on the job that encouraged staff members to try out new ideas, find their unique voice, and learn through trial and error.

Staff reflected that the camp environment facilitated novel experiences and fostered the development of new skills. The new experiences took them out of their comfort zones and helped them discover new talents. The relational nature of camp encouraged consistent reflection on the novel experiences, helping staff members articulate what they had learned. The key difference with experiential leadership, compared with experiential learning, is that staff members were not learning by doing as much as they were learning by leading. This gave them agency, a key factor of the experience that will be explored below. This agency asked staff to put the faith in their own words and make it their own, reflecting the second most important factor of emerging adult faith formation that Smith notes: “genuine internalization of religious significance.”²⁸

The third major element was openness to experiences of God. The emphasis sometimes chafed against participants’ experience growing up in the church, which they viewed as largely passive and overly focused on doctrine. This led some to new understandings, while others felt forced to choose between an active, searching faith and church doctrine. One lay leader reflected, “I was encountering God talk in a different way, in the context of other people my age who were also encountering that, and it led to conversations about God that I hadn’t had before, which then opened for me those spaces where I encountered the Holy Spirit and learned more about who I was and who God was.” In the openness to God and recognition of God experiences, staff became more aware of the movement of the Holy Spirit, which several observed was often neglected in Lutheran catechesis. Among the surveyed ELCA clergy members who worked at camp, an overwhelming 90% affirmed, “At camp, I experienced or encountered God in unique and powerful ways.” This active participation in the rhythm of faith through Christian practices is connected to what Smith identifies as the

third most important factor in emerging adult faith formation: “the personal practice of religious faith.”²⁹

Former staff also recognized the place itself as holy, as well as the particular (and limited) time they had there in the faith community. One pastor recalled, “Faith seemed so real for me when I was on staff, and that sense of comradery that you have with one another, it’s such a wonderful feeling.” Some described how the experience immersed them in Christian language and practices, engaging them in a daily rhythm of worship, Bible study, and prayer. They recalled practicing the action/reflection model through the lens of faith, considering how mundane and extraordinary experiences related to faith. The experience of God’s creation added to the experience of sacred place. They applied the holiness of time to individual weeks of camp and the entire summer experience. This opened for them an understanding that God is at work in the world in specific lives, specific times, and specific places. As we saw above, a substantial minority of Lutheran summer staff who participated in the 2021 survey had low levels of faith commitment. This impacted their own openness to experiences of God, as well as that of their fellow staff members, as we will explore below.

FINDING 3: EVIDENCE FOR MAJOR OUTCOMES

THE INTERACTION OF PARTICULAR life stories with the three key elements of the summer staff experience led directly to one or more major outcomes. An overwhelming 91% of ELCA clergy respondents who worked at camp affirmed the statement, “Working on camp staff had significant, positive impacts on my life,” and 97% of 2021 incoming summer staff who had previously been on staff agreed that their camp experiences had a significant impact on their lives. The most common outcomes of the experience, confirmed across all three phases of the study, included lasting relationships, a deeper sense of vocation/calling, faith formation, and new skills valuable for life, such as self-confidence, resilience, and leadership abilities. Each of these contributed to the development of leaders in the church.

Relationships were the clearest tangible outcomes of the summer staff experience. Former staff described friendships lasting for many years and even the rest of their lives, creating ongoing and mutual impacts. One lay leader described meeting some of his best friends, including his wife, at camp, and how these

people, rather than any spiritual compulsion, kept him connected to the church. He was far from the only staff member to meet a spouse or best friend at camp. Among the 40% of ELCA clergy that worked on camp staff, half said they met one or more of their best friends while working at camp, and a remarkable 20% met their spouse at camp. Among staff respondents in 2021, the most common response theme for what they would take away from the experience included new friendships and deeper relationships.

The most prevalent life skills that study participants identified were resilience, self-confidence, and, most especially, leadership. At the end of the summer, 86% of responding staff members agreed that they felt more confident in themselves since the beginning of the summer, while 95% agreed that they grew in their leadership abilities. Two survey items showing significant measurable growth from the beginning of the summer to the end of the summer (using paired sample t-tests) were “I like going out of my comfort zone and trying new things” ($t_{472}=3.44$, $SD=.855$, $p<.001$) and “I feel confident in my ability to be a leader” ($t_{473}=4.66$, $SD=.768$, $p<.001$). Other skills that staff identified in interviews and their open-ended comments included social skills, group facilitation, and a variety of specific hard skills (e.g., horsemanship, fire building, and playing the guitar). Some of these hard skills were transferable to marketable job skills, as was indicated in previous studies.³⁰ These all contributed to their life trajectory and professional development. One former staff member serving in congregational youth ministry reflected, “When I look at any professional success that I’ve had, I find that the skills that have served me well are muscles that I learned at camp, that grew there.”

The story is more complicated when it comes to faith formation and call to ministry because they were not as universal as those related to lasting relationships and valuable life skills. On the one hand, a large majority of staff members agreed at the end of the summer that they were strengthened in their faith (76%) and that their experiences gave them greater clarity on their life direction and career (72%). On the other hand, these numbers were much lower than those related to other outcomes and they did not have corroborating evidence from other survey items. A quick look at Table 1 reveals the complexity. First, it is notable that very few of the 28 items measured showed significant average change over the course of the summer. The norm was no change, on average. For example, there was no general increase or decrease among summer staff with items related to vocational discernment or faith relevance.

This is in stark contrast to a similar study of summer campers at Lutheran

camps, which saw an impressive 16 of 17 included items show significant change during a single week at camp.³¹ Moreover, all of the changes in the camper study were positive in terms of growth in faith and self-understanding. The expectation for the summer staff study was that change would be even more consistent than for the campers. However, this was not the case. Only 8 of the 28 items included on the pre- and post-camp surveys showed significant change, on average, and 5 of these showed a negative trajectory. Aside from the leadership and self-confidence variables noted above, the only other item that saw significant positive change across the entire dataset was increased agreement with, “I have a good understanding of Lutheran theology.”

Table 1: Changes in Perceptions among Summer Staff from Pre-Camp to Post-Camp

	<i>n</i>	<i>T1 mean</i>	<i>T2 mean</i>	<i>DM T2-T1</i>
Faith Relevance				
† Faith in God helps me in my daily life	459	3.85	3.90	.050
† I have important things to offer the Church and the world	467	4.30	4.30	.004
† I have Christian friences that I can turn to in times of need	464	4.05	4.13	.086
Congregational Connection				
The Christian Church is a force for good in the world	450	3.59	3.59	.002
I oftentimes think that Christianity would be better off wihout an organized church	421	2.88	3.11	.223***
† 5 years from now, I plan to be active in a Christian church/congregation	410	4.00	4.01	.017

Regular worship attendance is important for my faith	461	3.11	3.12	.011
Belief/Theology				
† God created the world	450	4.31	4.25	-.062
† The Holy Spirit is active in the world	448	4.36	4.34	-.013
† The Bible is the word of God	449	3.73	3.59	-.140**
We earn God's love and forgiveness by doing good things	453	2.06	1.96	-.099
† I believe that Jesus rose from the dead	438	4.35	4.33	-.021
I have a good understanding of Lutheran theology	455	3.60	3.82	.215***
Confidence, Character, and Life Direction				
I like going out of my comfort zone and trying new things	472	3.93	4.06	.131**
Oftentimes, my actions do not align with my beliefs	457	2.53	2.45	-.088
I am good at solving problems with a team of people	477	4.39	4.43	.048
When something bad or frustrating happens, I have trouble bouncing back and finding joy	475	2.76	2.69	-.067
I feel confident in my ability to be a leader	473	4.33	4.49	.165***

I know that I can make friends	472	4.50	4.52	.019
I am oftentimes unhappy about my life and who I am	472	2.69	2.63	-.064
I am currently feeling overextended and involved in too many things	474	2.84	2.83	-.004
I am currently finding good balance in my life between relationships, school, job, etc.	467	3.66	3.74	.079
I am unsure what I want to do for a career	483	2.72	2.72	.006
I plan to work full-time in a congregation or other Christian ministry	428	2.08	2.07	-.009
I think God is calling me to professional ministry	424	2.32	2.25	-.071
Perceptions of Camp and the Church				
Impressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)	423	5.09	4.94	-.144***
Impressions of Christianity, in general	467	4.48	4.40	-.075*
Impressions of this camp	485	5.72	5.46	-.262

*Asterisks indicate the *t*-value was significant at the level $p < .05$ (*), $p < .01$ (**), or $p < .001$ (***)

† Item was included in the faith commitment scale

Meanwhile, there was a surprising decrease in regard for the Christian church, which was hinted at in the interviews with former staff. Positive impressions of the ELCA and Christianity, in general, decreased during the course of the summer, while staff members increased in agreement with, “I oftentimes think

that Christianity would be better off without an organized church.” While it was surprising that there was no general increase in survey items related to belief in God, faith relevance, or congregational connection, it was even more surprising to see a decline in agreement with “The Bible is the word of God,” particularly since staff began the summer with a low average agreement level (only 64% agreed). These declines can help explain why there was no general increase in staff considering a call to full time ministry or ministry in a congregation. There is precedent for this sort of regression among summer staff during their summer experience. Botting, Ribbe, and Robinson noted a similar pattern of regression in desired outcomes among a substantial minority of staff in their study.³²

These findings are surprising because the other two phases of the study indicated widespread impacts among summer staff on faith formation and call to ministry. One former staff member recalled, “It took me a while to think that I was called to be a pastor. But to have a whole summer of leading Bible studies, creating worships and preaching and being told, ‘Wow, you’re really good at that,’ was a huge part of my call story, of hearing this external call that was there even before I thought about going into ministry.” Among ELCA clergy respondents who worked on camp staff, 75% agreed that their camp experiences were instrumental in their call to rostered ministry, and 37% affirmed that camp was the primary place they received their call to ministry. Camp staff experiences were clearly influential to a large number of people who found themselves in the ministry, but this does not mean that these call stories are widespread among summer staff. While the camp staff experience clearly nurtures leadership, this does not necessarily translate into leadership for the church.

This begs the question of what makes the staff experience effective in faith formation and call to ministry. Diving deeper into the summer staff data reveals that staff experiences themselves were vastly different among participating camps. Certain qualities of the staff experience impacted growth in a number of outcomes, most especially faith formation and call to ministry.

THREE FACTORS IMPACTING GROWTH

THERE WERE THREE CRUCIAL FACTORS impacting staff outcomes. Intriguingly, each of these factors corresponded remarkably well to one of the three major elements of the staff experience identified in the first phase of the project. These

factors included support, agency, and consistency of faith in the staff community. It is noteworthy that Botting, Ribbe, and Robinson also identified support and agency as crucial factors for staff development in their study, offering valuable corroboration to the findings.³³

There were six items in the post-camp survey that directly asked respondents about perceived outcomes (e.g., I grew in my leadership abilities). There were multiple variables that had significant positive correlations with all six of these growth variables. Those with the highest average correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) among the six growth variables were:

1. When I was feeling down, exhausted, or not at my best, other staff members helped and supported me ($r=.337$)
2. I felt supported by my fellow summer staff members ($r=.330$)
3. I felt supported in my personal faith journey by my supervisors ($r=.322$)
4. I felt like my opinions and input were valued ($r=.314$)
5. I was confident that my specific tasks fit in with the mission of the camp ($r=.295$)
6. I felt supported by leadership staff and supervisors ($r=.289$)

These correlations give evidence not of direct causation, but rather, relationships between perceived growth and specific experiences during the summer. Four of these six factors related to the support that staff members felt during their time at camp, related directly to the major element of a community of common purpose. The stronger the sense of support they perceived from the community, the greater the impact they reported. The item with the highest correlation is crucial because staff members consistently reported that the job was stressful and challenging. Moreover, a large number of staff respondents entered the summer with serious mental health concerns. These factors contributed to exhaustion and burnout. At the end of the summer, large percentages of respondents indicated they were exhausted, drained, or burnt out physically (28%), emotionally (40%), or spiritually (11%). Considering all three of these categories together, over half (52%) of all respondents reported feeling exhausted, drained, or burnt out in at least one category. These staff clearly needed support during the summer, and not all communities were effective in providing it. Those experiencing burnout showed no growth or even a slight decline in items related to self-confidence (e.g., increased agreement with "I am oftentimes unhappy about my life and who I am," $t_{247}=.994$, $p=.161$). Additionally, those indicating exhaustion/burnout showed

a significant decline in perceptions about the ELCA ($t_{219}=-4.523$, $SD=.822$, $p<.001$) and Christianity, in general ($t_{242}=-2.062$, $SD=.779$, $p<.05$), while those not indicating exhaustion or burnout did not change significantly. This explains almost all of the decline evident in those variables in Table 1. The prevalence of camp staff burnout is corroborated in other studies,³⁴ and one study found that support from peers and camp supervisors helped mitigate fatigue and burnout.³⁵

The other two variables most strongly correlated with positive growth (numbers 4 and 5 above) were related to staff agency. Staff members perceived higher levels of growth when they had increased agreement that they mattered, were valued, and contributed meaningfully. This factor is closely related to the element of experiential leadership. As with support, camps that lived more fully into the task of experiential leadership by giving their staff more agency saw more growth in their staff members.

These were system-wide factors that impacted the entire staff community. Some camps were simply more effective at providing their staff adequate support and agency. This was represented with a simple calculation using four of the highly correlated variables above (numbers 1, 4, 5, and 6). Each respondent's average agreement level was calculated to produce the index on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The overall average from all respondents was 4.22 and the median was 4.25. Respondents were then divided according to their camp, and the average agreement of all staff from each camp was calculated and compared with the central tendencies of all staff. Camps within 0.1 of the central tendency were categorized as "moderate support/agency" (10 camps). Those lower than this (< 4.12) were categorized as "low support/agency" (15 camps), and those with a higher average (> 4.32) were categorized as "high support/agency" (17 camps). This division was selected because it divided the post-summer survey respondents roughly into thirds based on the category of their camp (29% low, 32% moderate, and 39% high). Staff outcomes were then individually assessed based on the categories of support/agency experienced in the camp where they worked.

Staff who worked at camps with higher levels of support/agency were much more likely to agree that they were strengthened in their faith, grew in leadership abilities, felt more confident in themselves, and that the camp experience had a significant impact on their lives. They also reported significantly less frequent feelings of overwhelming anxiety, feeling very down or hopeless, and having thoughts of self-harm during the summer. At the end of the summer, staff working at camps with low levels of support/agency were 1.4 times more likely

to be physically exhausted/burnt out, 2.3 times more likely to be emotionally exhausted/burnt out, and 3.8 times more likely to be spiritually exhausted/burnt out compared with staff at camps with high support/agency.

Looking at the individual growth variables is revealing. Staff who worked at camps categorized as having low levels of support/agency were the only subgroup measured that did not show significant growth in “I feel confident in my ability to be a leader” from the pre-camp to post-camp survey ($t_{134}=1.329$, $SD=.780$, $p=.093$). They showed slight (non-significant) increases in agreement with “I am oftentimes unhappy about my life and who I am” ($t_{135}=.557$, $SD=1.081$, $p=.289$) and “When something bad or frustrating happens, I have trouble bouncing back and finding joy” ($t_{137}=.948$, $SD=1.262$, $p=.172$). For the most part, they showed a pattern of non-growth, whereas those working at camps categorized as having high levels of support/agency had significant positive growth in multiple variables. This indicates that camps providing more consistent support and agency to their staff were more effective in achieving desired outcomes. Additionally, the lack of growth evident in most variables across the entire dataset (Table 1) was largely due to the camps with low levels of support and agency for their staff.

The other major factor impacting growth was the consistency of faith in the staff community. As noted above, a large number of staff respondents had low levels of faith commitment. As with support and agency, several factors were combined into an index (the 8 items marked with † in Table 1). These eight factors combined a belief index with a faith relevance index to get a summary of faith commitment.³⁶ Those with low or moderate levels of both belief and faith relevance (23% of respondents) were categorized as “uncommitted.” Those with high or very high levels of both (54%) were categorized as “highly committed.” The remaining staff (23%) were categorized as “marginally committed.” While two-thirds of participating camps (65%) had staffs made up of those in the highly committed category, the remaining third (35%) had a minority of highly committed Christians on their staff. The differences between these two groups of camps reveals the importance of hiring staff who are already committed Christians, if faith formation is a desired outcome of the experience. This creates a community of faith that nurtures faith among all staff members and helps enable the third major element of the summer staff community: openness to experiences of God.

Respondents who were part of a staff that was majority highly committed Christians were significantly more likely to report being strengthened in their personal faith, that the experience gave them greater clarity on their life direction/career, and that they were finding good balance in their lives at the end of

the summer. The measured growth from the pre-summer survey to the post-summer survey revealed the largest differences.

In terms of belief and theology, the greatest difference was in agreement with “The Bible is the word of God.” Those working at minority committed Christian camps declined significantly in their agreement ($t_{158}=-4.351$, $SD=.933$, $p<.001$), while those working on staffs that were majority committed Christians showed no significant change, demonstrating that the decline observed in Table 1 was entirely related to the minority committed camps. Even greater differences were evident in regard for the church. Respondents who worked on staffs that were minority committed Christians declined significantly in their agreement with “The Christian Church is a force for good in the world” ($t_{163}=-2.686$, $SD=.846$, $p<.01$) and also declined (non-significant) in agreement with “Regular worship attendance is important for my faith.” On the other hand, respondents working at camps with majority committed Christians on staff increased significantly in agreement with the first statement ($t_{288}=2.134$, $SD=.801$, $p<.05$) and also increased (non-significant) in agreement with the second.

The uncommitted staff members (23% of all respondents) were distributed almost evenly between camps that had minority (56%) and majority (44%) committed staff members, facilitating comparison of the impacts measured among these staff members based on the faith commitment of their camp community. The results were predictable. Almost two-thirds (63%) of those working at majority committed Christian camps agreed at the end of the summer that they were strengthened in their faith, compared with less than half (47%) of those working at minority committed Christian camps. In the individual measurements, those at majority committed Christian camps increased significantly in both their belief in God and their understanding that faith matters in life, including significant increases in agreement with “Faith in God helps me in my daily life” ($t_{45}=3.117$, $SD=1.100$, $p<.01$), “I have Christian friends I can turn to in times of need” ($t_{46}=3.384$, $SD=1.351$, $p<.001$), “5 years from now, I plan to be active in a Christian church/congregation” ($t_{37}=2.918$, $SD=1.070$, $p<.01$), “I believe that Jesus rose from the dead” ($t_{39}=2.016$, $SD=1.112$, $p<.05$), and “I have a good understanding of Lutheran theology” ($t_{47}=2.258$, $SD=1.228$, $p<.01$). In contrast, those who worked at camps with a minority of committed Christians had no significant change in any of these, except “Faith in God helps me in my daily life,” which showed modest but significant growth ($t_{58}=2.040$, $SD=.965$, $p<.05$).

The impacts on the highly committed Christians were exactly opposite. Those who arrived at camp with high levels of belief and faith relevance tended to

decline in both if they were embedded in a staff community in which committed Christians were in the minority. These staff declined significantly in their agreement with “I believe that Jesus rose from the dead” ($t_{60}=-2.619$, $SD=.493$, $p<.01$), “The Bible is the word of God” ($t_{58}=-3.379$, $SD=.855$, $p<.001$), “The Christian Church is a force for good in the world” ($t_{58}=-1.961$, $SD=.736$, $p<.05$), and “I have Christian friends that I can turn to in times of need” ($t_{59}=-2.212$, $SD=.883$, $p<.05$). In contrast, the highly committed Christians on staff with majority committed Christians tended to maintain their very high levels of belief and faith relevance, with no significant declines in any of these, in spite of their high starting values, except for “I believe that Jesus rose from the dead” ($t_{200}=-2.369$, $SD=.448$, $p<.01$), though it is notable that 98% of this group still agreed with this statement at the end of the summer, in spite of the statistically significant decline. At the end of the summer, 89% of those on majority committed Christian staffs agreed that they were strengthened in their personal faith, compared with only 72% of those on minority committed Christian staffs.

DISCUSSION AND FURTHER ANALYSIS

THESE FINDINGS OFFER COMPELLING EVIDENCE of the need to embed emerging adults in communities of faith. Meaningful relationships tend to shape the faith of this age group. Borrowing from Dallas Willard, Setran and Kiesling describe the process of emerging adults “owning and internalizing their faith commitments” as being “fostered not by complete autonomy and separation from authority structures but within ‘communities of truth’ that bestow Christian identity on emerging adults.”³⁷ When they are grounded in Christian faith commitment, these summer staff communities function as communities of truth, fertile ground for faith exploration and formation, as Ribbe has argued.³⁸ Those with low levels of faith commitment will tend to grow significantly in their faith when they are surrounded by committed peers, while the religiously committed will tend to decline in their faith commitment when they are embedded in a community with low or marginal levels of faith. The implications for Christian camps are clear: if they want to nurture people of faith, they must ensure that their summer staff is predominantly made up of committed Christians.

There were ten participating camps that exhibited high levels of support/agency and had a staff that was majority committed Christians. According to

the measurements of this study, these camps can be considered most effective with the three essential elements of the summer staff experience. Considering only these ten camps, the outcomes were remarkably different for the variables shown in Table 1. They demonstrated much higher outcomes related to self-confidence and faith relevance, and they did not show the decline in regard for the Christian church evident in Table 1. In fact, they showed significant increase in agreement with, “5 years from now, I plan to be active in a Christian church/congregation” ($t_{107}=2.435$, $SD=.675$, $p<.01$). Additionally, they increased significantly in agreement with both “I think God is calling me to professional ministry” ($t_{112}=2.206$, $SD=1.713$, $p<.05$) and “I plan to work full-time in a congregation or other Christian ministry” ($t_{112}=3.377$, $SD=1.819$, $p<.001$). These factors of support, agency, and a community of faith are clearly essential for nurturing faith leaders in the camp environment.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

THIS STUDY WAS LIMITED to a single denomination, the ELCA. While this allowed a multi-dimensional look at the clergy, summer staff, and camp operations that function as ministry partners, the findings may well be different in other Christian traditions. It is notable that the ELCA has a strong tradition of Christian camping and the clergy generally have high regard for camping ministry. This is not the case in every Christian tradition. Additionally, ELCA camps tend to have similar programs (e.g., cabin counselors almost always lead worship and Bible study time). This reduced the number of variables in the study, but it also means that the findings may be different in camps that have different programmatic styles (e.g., those featuring large rallies, altar calls, or non-counseling staff leading Bible study and worship time). Further study is needed to assess the camp staff experience in other Christian traditions and styles of camping ministry, particularly those in which staff have less direct ministry roles than in ELCA camping.

The study took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, making the summer of 2021 unique in many ways.³⁹ Most camps were closed the previous summer because of the pandemic. This meant fewer returning staff members serving at the participating camps. Many reported difficulties hiring summer staff in 2021, resulting in some being understaffed for the summer. This dynamic caused

increased stress among camp staff members, likely contributing to increased burnout. The pandemic also exacerbated mental health concerns among youth and emerging adults. Many of those serving on summer staff had participated in virtual high school or college in the year prior to camp, meaning the camp experience may have been their first high-intensity social exposure in over a year. These factors likely contributed to higher instances of mental health concerns among staff members and more challenging social interactions. Repeating the summer staff survey could better identify the factors unique to 2021 and assess if faith formation outcomes were more common during more typical summers.

The summer staff survey was limited to the camp experience itself. Though the post-camp survey captured immediate perceptions of the staff experience, the level of exhaustion and newness of the experience undoubtedly impacted the evaluations. Future studies should consider a survey of staff two or more months after the camp experience so that they are better able to reflect on the experience and the impacts it had on their lives.

CONCLUSIONS

THE SUMMER CAMP STAFF EXPERIENCE offers clear potential for emerging adults to grow in faith and develop a sense of vocation/calling. The major elements of the experience align remarkably well with factors that multiple researchers have identified as particularly important to emerging adult religious development. Moreover, the study of the experience in the ELCA tradition revealed clear and widespread impacts. These were especially evident among ELCA clergy members, for whom camp had an outsized role in their faith formation and call to ministry. However, these impacts are far from universal and depend on several key factors.

The three major elements of the camp staff experience that lead to desired outcomes are a set-apart community of common purpose, experiential leadership, and openness to experiences of God. Camps can strengthen these elements by providing adequate support for their summer staff members, giving them agency, and ensuring that the staff community is made up primarily of committed Christians. Camps in which these three factors were not present tended to have summer staff feel exhausted or burnt out by the end of the summer, with many exhibiting declines in self-confidence and regard for the church. In contrast,

summer staff working at camps exhibiting all three factors tended to have very positive experiences, with growth evident in multiple outcomes, including faith formation, leadership, and self-confidence. These camps were also most effective in supporting staff in discerning a call to professional ministry.

The camp staff experience is not a stand-alone experience. To the extent that it impacts faith formation, self-confidence, call to ministry, and a host of other outcomes, it relies on other supporting ministries in a complex matrix of faith formation. In order to be effective at faith formation, therefore, camps must partner with other ministries. Some of the most important of these identified in the study included campus ministries, congregations, and national or regional youth conventions. Since camps have such great potential to nurture calls to professional ministry, partnerships with seminaries could provide support to those considering this path and help seminaries address the clergy shortage.



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23. The lone exception was a one-year international service experience called Young Adults in Global Mission, which was higher in both cases, though it was only available for a small group of participants each year (less than 2% of respondents).
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