

13 Ways A Church Can Be Like Camp

Richard G. Sayther, CFRE
Managing Partner
Gronlund Sayther Brunkow GSB
25 March 2013

Foreword

My first six years after Seminary I served as parish pastor, having three positions within the same congregation. My second call was to start a new Lutheran Bible Camp where I served the next eight years.

When I went into Outdoor Ministry, I always envisioned I'd go back to the parish thinking that whatever I learned at camp would be applicable to the parish.

I never went back to work as a parish pastor or a camp director. I joined my mentor and friend Bob Gronlund in a Financial and Organizational Development consulting firm. A few years later Dave Brunkow, my good friend, joined us. Since 1976 Gronlund Sayther Brunkow GSB (www.GSBFundRaising.com) has served over 350 charities: agencies, congregations, judicatories, institutions, organizations and ministries, including 85 camps of the church.

During all of these years I continue to be keenly interested in what makes a parish flourish and be effective in ministry and mission.

Recently my wife Barb and I have become involved with Hosanna!, a large Lutheran congregation in Lakeville MN. Founded in 1980 as a mission start, Hosanna! now has a membership of 6500 people plus hundreds more who participate without being members.

We were intrigued by much of what this congregation offers people. The more we became involved -- attending Sunday Services, seminars and workshops, Bible studies, and eventually the membership (they call it "partnership") class, the more clear it became that this congregation has taken many of the working principles and operational methodologies common in Bible Camps and have applied them to a congregational setting.

Once I discovered that for me being in this congregation was like being at camp, I became very interested in looking into how this congregation was carrying on its work. Perhaps other congregations could learn from this experience and my observations.

This is my attempt to discern and note the various ways Hosanna! is using what in camping circles is common practice. Presented here are the Principles that I believe are common in the camping ministry and that can be applied in congregations.

If your congregation is already applying these Principles, be assured you are becoming more like camp.

If you have not tried these Principles, read on and perhaps you will be inspired to try them in your own congregation.

Thirteen Principles are presented. Under each Principle I first share my observations regarding what I have observed camps doing. Second, I then describe what I see Hosanna! doing as an example of their applying the Principle. Finally, I offer suggestions as to what your congregation could do to honor the Principle.

I am sure that using your imagination you will come up with other creative ways to put these Principles into action... and be a church that's like camp.

Camping Principles At Work In A Church

1. Expect something good spiritually to happen to each person who comes on the site.

Camp

A fee is paid by the camper. Thus there are expectations. Parents and pastors expect that when a child goes to camp, the child will come back a different person – more in tune with his or her life in Christ, more aware they are on a spiritual journey, more convinced God loves them. Camp is meant to be a deeply personal experience.

Parents want and expect their child to be drawn closer to Christ and the Church.

This spiritual dimension (individual awareness of God's love in Christ and His presence) is deemed more important than developing social skills, coping with being away from home, learning to care for the earth and becoming excited about serving others... as important as these may be. The primary expectation is that the child will more aware of the presence of Jesus Christ in his or her life.

From the establishment of many of our camps in the 1920's through the mid- to late-1970's, high school youth were the primary group for whom the camp program was designed. This was because the young people were of an age where they could be discerning, open to heeding the call of God in Christ Jesus, and able to come to deeper awareness of God's presence. This was the target group of the camps. And while community living (building) was a component of program, the individual was the number one target for efforts by pastors and staff. We were trying to reach young people – one at a time – with the Gospel in ways which would help them set direction for the rest of their lives.

The purpose of camp is Faith Introduction for those who know nothing about Jesus Christ; Faith Formation for those who are growing in their understanding and awareness of the Lord; Faith Development for those who are going deeper into their Christian journey.

Church

This church's motto or theme states this Principle clearly: "*We believe the Lord led you here today.*" This theme shapes the whole approach of the weekly worship Service as well as other activities at the church. There is nothing casual about this approach. It's a mindset.

An expected result of the worship Service (preaching, Scripture reading, music, prayers, being together) is that the Lord will make something good happen within each person who is present.

One Sunday morning Barb and I were very early to the Service. While we were sitting quietly, we noticed a person walking up and down the rows, touching the back of each seat. I asked Barb, “Do you know what that woman is doing? She’s praying for every person who will sit in that seat this morning.” Great expectations.

What Does This Mean?

This attitude – expecting something good spiritually to happen to each person – keeps leaders focused on what the Lord will be doing when the people gather.

If this is not the primary focus, leaders will often default to be concerned first about their own performance and actions during the Service.

Expecting the Lord to be at work within individuals present frees leaders to trust and to have confidence that what will be happening is more than correct liturgy and practice, eloquent sermons, and beautifully performed music.

This confidence is that the Word – read, proclaimed, sung, and discussed: the Living Word – will be active in the hearts of each person. And because the Word of God is present, good things will happen.

Leaders will be free to do their best in preparing and presenting; being mindful that having good things happen to people does not depend upon the leaders but rather upon the One who calls people together.

2. Individuals come first... how they are faring in their daily lives and on their spiritual journey.

Camp

Staff get to know each child as best as possible in the time they have together. The response of each child to life together in the camp setting is of paramount importance and the focus of staff involvement with the child.

Camp counselors are trained to recognize and be alert to each child’s home and school situation, daily struggles, personality and involvement within the camp community.

Church

Sermons are targeted toward a person’s spiritual journey. The primary focus is to enable people to hear the Word, learn ways to apply the Word to their daily life and experience, and be more aware of the presence of Jesus Christ in their lives.

It’s amazing how, while being in a large audience of 2500 people, the individual senses that all this is directed to him or her personally. That’s because this church really does expect the Lord to do something with each one who enters the door.

Sermons, worship, small group activities all give attention to the individuals who are present. Sermons address the concerns and challenges, needs and hopes with which everyone struggles. Continuously the message of forgiveness, acceptance, hope, peace and joy is communicated.

For the most part politics and issues are left to be addressed in other settings and venues. When, however, these topics do come up, they are always in the context of how the individual is to respond.

What Does This Mean?

Know people. Know your people. Know them in their personal situations. We all have common needs and aspirations and are hungry for what the Lord alone can provide.

Let individuals – each in his/her own situation and circumstance of daily life – be the primary target of the presentations of the Gospel which are made in the Service and through the activities of the church.

Of course there is the community, the church local and global. This community is composed of individuals who, in their own way and time, are responding to the Gospel. As individuals are reached by the Gospel, the church is extended and the community strengthened... one person at a time.

3. Music has a purpose.

Camp

Music draws the children into the life of camp and moves them to deeper understanding of Scripture and the theology of the church.

Music communicates a sense of togetherness, of worship and praise, of an awareness of God's love, of caring for one another and the world God has made.

Camp has a Songbook containing about 50 tunes that are fun, uplifting, energizing and often filled with solid theological content.

Songs are modern in tempo and text. Kids love them. Sing them in the car on the way home. Teach their parents how to sing them. Music binds the kids together because they know them, love them and enjoy singing them.

The music works. Music brings out a response from the young people.

Church

This church has a reservoir of songs which, over time, attendees learn and sing. These mostly contemporary songs (some of which are old traditional hymns put to modern settings) proclaim

the Gospel, teach Lutheran theology, draw people together, tug at the heartstrings, and create a sense of awe and worship.

Some people know this style of worship only as observers or who heed what they have been taught about this style. They think the music is “entertainment” or that it is improper to have “I, My, Me” phrasing with the emphasis upon the singer rather than pointing to the Lord. I confess that was my original impression also.

One day coming back from the Sunday Service I said to Barb, “You know, these people must know what they are doing with the music and worship style. What is the theology behind this type of worship?”

Then it dawned on me: the basis of this style of worship is the Book of Psalms. There’s plenty of “I, My, Me” in the Psalms. The Psalms is a pretty personal collection both in authorship and in the use made of it today.

Church uses music to educate, motivate, encourage, bring hope and comfort to individuals, and to create a sense of being in on something bigger than themselves.

Over the course of a year the songs cover the main themes of the church year. People know these songs. They learn them. They like them. They hum them in their sleep. Men are caught singing vigorously. This music works.

What Does This Mean?

Develop your own songbook, i.e. 50 hymns your people know (or will learn) and love and enjoy singing. You can teach them new songs once in a while but going back to their old favorites gives purpose to the music.

Teaching two new songs each week, pitched so high the men cannot sing them, and with a tempo that’s dull and out of date, simply does not cut it. That kind of music does not work.

Let the music move people in their hearts and minds. Let them through the music experience the sense of repentance and forgiveness, peace and joy, hope and encouragement, and the call to service.

Use tunes easy to sing and at a pitch people can reach, especially men. Put some life into them with rhythms and pace. And remember a main purpose of the music is to draw people into the experience they are having as they gather together in Jesus’ name.

4. Small groups build community

Camp

The model for most camps is to have one counselor and eight kids form a unit. This camper group does almost everything together during the week: Bible study, discussion, sleeping and eating, recreation activities, and just hanging out.

In the small group setting great learning takes place, friendships are formed, spiritual growth happens, and lives are changed.

Small groups at camp make it possible for a child to feel at home in a new place, surrounded by scores of other kids, and part of a larger Christian community.

Church

Individuals who want to become more involved in the life of the church do so through participation in a small group. These small groups are organized around a wide variety of topics and subjects. One can be in several small groups depending upon the topic and the individual's interest.

Almost every activity, even when large numbers of people are participating, is designed around a small group experience. 160 people attended the Partners Course (new member course which met once a week for four weeks). One hour of the two hour session each week was spent in small groups. Very effective way to get people to know one another, have specific questions answered, and become more comfortable with others in the congregation.

What Does This Mean?

Think Small Group. Design as many opportunities as possible to use small groups to carry on the activities of the congregation.

Small group experiences within existing church organizations (church councils, committees, classes, planning and work teams, etc.) can have a profound impact on people. These are small groups.

Offering small group experiences around a variety of topics will attract people and help them get to know each other better – even some who are life-long friends.

Include Bible study, prayer and sharing – especially sharing – in each small group gathering.

5. Staff and volunteers are well trained and nurtured.

Camp

The impact staff have on children at camp is due in large part to the intensive training counselors and leaders receive. College-aged young people spend two weeks at the beginning of each summer season learning skills and program which enable them to relate to and guide the children who will be in their care during the summer. Staff become well-versed in Bible Study, group dynamics, small group facilitation, communication, listening, and relating constructively to children.

Research shows that the staff training enterprise conducted throughout the outdoor ministry network is one of the most effective and far-reaching youth leadership development efforts of the church.

Church

Instruction sessions are provided for people who wish to volunteer for any activity for which volunteers are needed. Volunteers are given detailed and extensive education, monitoring and support.

Before engaging in any activity the volunteer must go through orientation and training. This is not a casual once-over but detailed and comprehensive in scope.

What Does This Mean?

Take training of volunteers seriously. Give them time and attention. Find creative ways to help people carry out their responsibilities. An upgraded level of training gives people confidence, empowers them to perform their tasks at a higher level, and elevates the perception of their work.

6. Bible Study, Prayer and Sharing are woven into community life.

Camp

Weekly and daily themes are built around biblical passages and concepts. Daily Bible study takes place in small group settings and sometimes in larger contexts. Kids open and read the Bible. Kids get turned on to the Scripture. Prayer is a regular part of the small group life.

Kids are encouraged to talk about what they are learning that is making a difference in their lives.

Church

Staff and volunteers prepare for Sunday Services by praying for the musicians, preachers, prayer ministers, ushers, teachers and hosts.

In worship people are drawn into the Scripture. Bibles are handed out to those who do not have them. During the Service specific texts are pointed out, shown on the media screens, sung, and talked about in the sermons.

Meetings and gatherings begin with reference to a scripture text and with prayer. Discussion of the texts turns to what the scripture passage means in the lives of those in the meeting. Prayer needs are lifted up. People share how the Lord is at work in their own lives. They are drawn into caring about others and praying for them. They let each other know how prayers are answered from their own experiences.

Bible Study, praying and sharing is a way of life.

What Does This Mean?

Never pass up an opportunity to open and read the Scripture, ask for people to express how the text speaks to them, to share any insights into God at work in their lives, and to join in prayer.

This ritual (or pattern) would do wonders as every group begins its time together.

7. Ooze Hospitality

Camp

Staff are eager hosts to whomever comes to the site; first to the kids who will be campers for the week but also to anyone who enters the camp. Staff are energetic, joyous, upbeat and full of life.

Staff mingle with guests, are visible and alert, looking for ways to make guests feel comfortable and at home. Staff learn how to approach people they don't know, display welcoming facial expressions, voice comments to get conversation started. Badges, T-shirts and signage are also helpful to make them recognizable as hosts.

Church

Hosts (some churches call them Greeters), both staff and volunteers, are very visible. The Hosts cannot be missed by members, regular guests or visitors. Identified by badges with colorful lanyards, Hosts are smiling, pleasant, trying to make eye contact with everyone.

They are numerous, not just one or two at the door. They mingle throughout the building. Looking for opportunity to engage guests in conversation, they answer questions, give directions, and help people feel at home.

Information desks, signs and maps of the facility guide people to their destinations.

At the beginning of each Service the worship leader welcomes everyone, especially noting the first-timers or those who are new to the church. These welcome comments give information about the church facilities, what can be expected during the Service, and an invitation to make use of whatever the church can do to help them on their spiritual journey.

What Does This Mean?

Develop a Crew of Hosts who embraces this task with enthusiasm and creativity. Train them well in the skill of meeting and welcoming people. Do not rely solely on one or two people at the main door who simply shake hands and say hello.

Have clear and easily accessed signage to give directions to people new to the building.

Use the opening of the Service (or before it begins) to warm people up to being together, welcoming the guests, and setting the stage for the theme of the day. Even if guests rarely appear, this exercise may be reminder for members to invite others to be guests.

8. Leadership is shared.**Camp**

Staff is plural. No one person can pull off a successful camping season. Everyone on a camp staff has a crucial role to play and is essential to the smooth functioning of the operation.

Organized in ways to demark responsibilities, no one person is the focal point. Energy and work by all staff point to the One who makes us one, Jesus Christ. A camp setting often exemplifies the saying that "whoever is greatest among you is servant of all".

Camp staff who return year after year have opportunity to gain leadership skills and experience and to put those skills to use. It's a steep learning curve with rapid advancement possible as young people grow in their leadership abilities.

Church

While the Lead Pastor has given superb leadership to the development of this congregation, an organization of gifted staff and volunteers has evolved. The congregation is not totally dependent upon one pastor. Several of the staff are very dynamic preachers and leaders.

The church is organized to effectively assure that leadership springs up from within staff and the people. Every effort is made to encourage and support people to demonstrate their leadership by participating in the life of the church and in the service enterprises sponsored by the church.

What Does This Mean?

If you're the pastor, share the spotlight. Determine to develop others to use their talents and skills to be leaders in the congregation. Create programs and systems to identify, train, commission and support people as they find ways to serve.

Encourage people to form a group or project which allows them to follow or participate in their passion for mission or study.

9. Organize for flexibility and effectiveness.

Camp

Camping ministries are organized around the talents, skills and experiences of each staff person. Often programs, activities and plans are changed in an instant because something else will work better. Staff are instructed and prepared to be flexible, to adapt and adjust to given circumstances, and to be free to offer suggestions as to how the program can be improved.

Camps are adept at reviewing how programs are working at the end of a week session and at the end of the season. If a program is not working, it is tweaked and changed and sometimes eliminated.

The courage to make changes in operating the ministry is a hallmark of successful camping ministries.

Church

Church is not bogged down with “regular, monthly meetings” carried on for eons without change. Rather a Board of Vision comprised of 8 to 10 members meets regularly to give oversight, review and shape the big picture.

Other functions of the church are carried out by staff and volunteers on a task basis, with meetings taking place as needed to make sure the tasks get done.

Organized to provide flexibility, and to be result-oriented, the church seeks to be aware of how effective the church’s efforts are in the lives of people.

What Does This Mean?

Be aware of how your church is organized for doing its work. Be open to change in regard to how the council, commissions and committees function. How effective are they? Are the meetings productive? Are there other ways to accomplish the tasks at hand?

Let tradition and habit take a back seat to organizing people to get things done. Let constructive change become a way of life. Organize for effectiveness and results.

10. Promote Service, Generosity and Mission

Camp

Kids are expected to be actively involved in carrying out the day to day function of the camp community: cooking, gathering firewood, helping lead campfire/worship, joining in Bible study discussions, and keeping their environment in good shape.

Often offerings are taken as part of camp life and these gifts are sent to other parts of the world to extend the Kingdom and to help people in need. Youth become aware of mission enterprises across the globe.

Campers are sent home to share what they have learned about Jesus with their family and friends. Taking the Good News back to their home and school situations is a challenge each of them is asked to embrace.

Many young people have determined while at camp to follow the call of Christ to serve Him in their daily lives, to be in mission for and with Him. They are often sensitized to people around them, alert to their needs and open to giving help.

Church

Stories of the church's involvement in service projects locally and across the globe are continually lifted up so people will know about them, become involved and supportive.

Becoming involved in some mission/service venture is strongly encouraged. This outreach posture is part of the fabric of the church.

Generosity is celebrated. People are thanked, told what impact their offerings are having, and invited to keep on sharing.

What Does This Mean?

Do the best you can to carry out an effective on-going stewardship development program.

Give attention to the world-wide mission endeavors. Line up and recruit people to participate in service ventures close to home and far away.

List and publicize ways people can be of service. Lead people to look around their community to see needs and come up with ideas to meet those needs. Let people be continually asking each other where they see themselves in mission and service.

11. Facilities shape ministry

Camp

Outdoor Ministry is outdoors, in nature, on the land. Being in nature opens a person's mind and heart. Campfire circles enable people to look at each other. Moveable seating and going to other places on the site help kids be drawn closer to nature and to each other. All of the senses are involved when in an outdoor setting, around a campfire, or in the woods, or by a lake or stream, or on a hillside overlooking a prairie.

Church

The building has areas that encourage people to gather. In addition to the main worship area, other parts of the building are arranged to facilitate conversation, meeting, planning and being together.

Bright lighting, appropriate acoustics, round tables, clusters of chairs, and warm décor all are useful in helping ministry take shape.

Art with liturgical and scriptural themes are in the building. Multi-media with videos, music, lights and wall hangings serve to communicate theological and thematic concepts. The Worship Director explained the use of modern media in this way, “The lights, media screens, color, and art are today’s version of the old stained glass windows. Those windows were used to tell the story visually and elicit a response in people. Today we use contemporary methods to do the same thing.”

What Does This Mean?

Make use of modern technology with images, sound and color to create an environment within the facility that strengthens ministry.

Images, decorations, paintings, sculpture, banners and other art work tied in with liturgical and theological themes will lift people’s hearts.

Review the gathering spaces in the building and make changes so the setting will enhance the conversation, sharing and growing together.

As much as possible use round tables.

12. Practice the presence of Christ**Camp**

Staff are reminded they are living examples of Christ in the world and especially in the world of the campers who will be with them for the week. So staff are alert to and ready to let the young people see how Christ dwells in them.

Church

People are eager to engage others in conversations about each person’s spiritual journey. Informally and in all gatherings it is apparent people sense that the Lord is present with them in that moment.

What Does This Mean?

Encourage people to be in tune with their own spiritual journey and learn how to share this with others. When gathered together for whatever purpose, become more open and forthright about acknowledging and celebrating the presence of the Living Word within the lives of people.

Talk with each other about your faith. Then you will be better able to talk about Jesus with people who do not know Him.

13. Have Fun**Camp**

Campers and staff have fun together. What better reason to express joy through playfulness and fun than the awareness that in Christ each person is loved by God. Parents and campers often comment on how meaningful it is to grow in the faith while having fun together.

Church

Being in the Lord's presence is reason for joy and celebration. Amid the seriousness of the Service, a spirit of humor, fun, and laughter is present. The pastor states publically that as a congregation they like to have fun. This playfulness is underscored when the pastor drives out onto the stage in a flashy car as part of the sermon... or a video shows him skydiving or flying in a hot air balloon. An atmosphere of happiness, pleasantness, and joy is present in this congregation. This is a fun – joyous - place to be.

What Does This Mean?

Lighten up, especially during the Service. Create an atmosphere of light-heartedness, celebration and even fun. People should enjoy being together. It is not irreverent to laugh.

Conclusion

Countless times I have heard pastors, parents and young people express their wish that the experience and vibrancy of Bible Camp could somehow be transferred back home so that their congregations could be more like camp.

This paper has been my humble attempt to point out ways where this life-changing experience of Bible Camp can happen in a local congregation.

My Grandmother Johnson used to say, "Too bad we don't have two lives to live; the first one to practice on, the second one for real." I have asked myself now and then how I would do it if I went back into the parish ministry. Thanks to what I have seen in Hosanna!, I know I would put into play these 13 Principles.

I wish you Godspeed in your ministry and journey.

