

Saving souls by the hundreds

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There are unique challenges in getting the gospel to the current generation of young people. Christian camping, writes Michelle Underwood, provides unique opportunities to meet those challenges.

How many people became Christians at your church last year? Five? Ten? Twenty? Of course, we're thankful for just one, but when we consider the number of people in our suburbs, we have a long way to go.

We don't always seem to be doing a great job at getting our unbelieving friends to church, and so our ministers are often preaching to the converted. How can we reach the regular Joe or Josephine (who wouldn't dream of stepping foot inside a church) with the saving power of the gospel message?

Statistically speaking, most people who become Christians do so during their school years. One organization that has spent 75 years taking the gospel to unchurched kids with great success, is The Crusader Union of Australia. Founded in 1930, Crusaders runs activity-based evangelical holiday camps, where the Bible is taught faithfully and



present the gospel to my circle of friends. I think Christian camps were the most successful of my feeble attempts because they constructed a positive case for the gospel message—not just in one talk and in one format—but over five days and in a

range of styles. It gave enough context for my friends who had very little background in the Bible to see how Jesus makes sense of the world and demands our allegiance. Camps also helped to undermine a lot of the negative associations my friends had about Christians and churches. They got to know a bunch of Christians who enjoyed themselves, looked out for people, and modelled right relationships. The leaders certainly weren't the hypocritical kill-joys my

friends were expecting, and the fact that they paid money to spend their holidays with us was a bit of a shock. The need for Christian camps has never been more relevant than for the youth of this generation. Reflect on the make up of a typical postmodern teenager: hungry for 'extreme' experiences, caring more for authentic living than rational truth, wanting to see if something 'works', not just if it is true. Send them away for a week with Christians who live out what they believe, have a fun time without the need for drugs and alcohol, and you have a powerful forum for evangelism.

Many are now discovering the value of this 'going away together' as a tool for evangelism—both *Alpha* and *Introducing God* evangelistic courses include a weekend away as part of their approach. What is it that makes a camp, whether it be for a weekend or a week, such a powerful ministry tool? Here are just some suggestions:

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the gospel proclaimed in word and action. Last year over 200 young people made a commitment to follow Jesus after attending one of the 42 CRU holiday camps run by Crusaders each year.

Fourth-year Moore College student, Nick Duke, believes Christian camping is a great way to reach unchurched young people. He explains:

I worked hard at school to try and

1. The Bible is taught and studied every day

Going away together means you have a guaranteed captive audience who won't miss that one crucial talk, which so often happens from week to week at Sunday church meetings.

2. There is ample opportunity for people to ask questions and get answers

Often people need time to process what they hear, and pluck up enough courage to ask questions. When you are away together, questions can be asked straight away in discussion groups or over breakfast, after dinner, around the campfire, out on a sailing boat—anytime, and young Christian leaders are there to share the answers.

3. The Christian life is on display, lived out 24 hours a day

Perhaps this is the real reason why going away together can be so effective. The Christians on camp live out what is taught from the Bible. People see first hand what the Christian life is like—what it means to read the Bible and pray daily, to be committed to love and service, modelling joy and kindness, selflessness and gratitude. They see leaders washing dishes, mopping floors, serving food. Leaders who are willing to invest time in them, get alongside them and get to know them—who genuinely take an interest and care for them. In this day and age, when so many young people come from broken families and don't know the powerful love of Christ, to experience the love of Christ's servants can be a powerful testimony to the 'Servant King', and the transformation he is able to make in people's lives.

4. Christian camps show that a great time can be had without drugs and alcohol

The world tells people that life is not fun without sex, getting drunk and taking illegal substances. The fun experiences had on Christian camps break down negative perceptions people

might have that all Christians are boring and that God is a kill-joy.

5. Young Christians can be equipped for leadership and ministry

Camps depend on a good leadership team, and there is ample opportunity for all sorts of people to use their different gifts. Junior leaders can work alongside more mature ones and learn 'on the job'. The nature of a camp is an excellent forum for showing that Christian ministry is not just about 'up front' skills, but about service, since camps don't happen without a lot of 'behind the scenes' work. Many people can testify to having been equipped and inspired for a lifetime of Christian ministry after first cutting their teeth on camps.

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6. There is just more time to have input and build relationships

Did you know that for a young person, a week on a camp is equivalent to the time spent at a whole year's worth of youth group? That makes going away together a very efficient use of time! And time means good relationship building. You simply get to know each other better when you go away together, than if you just meet once a week for an hour or two.

7. Younger Christians can be encouraged in evangelism

Not everyone may be an evangelistic speaker, but everyone can invite friends on a holiday. Camps are an easy place for kids to bring their friends to—somewhere they know the gospel will

be proclaimed, explained and lived out.

8. Young people can be reached who would never set foot inside a church building

In our evangelistic efforts, we often forget, or are unaware of, the hoops that we expect people to jump through just to hear the message—like setting foot inside an odd looking, cold building to sit on a hard, uncomfortable seat and listen to a long lecture. Many teenagers would never do it. But they will snowboard, or surf, or ski, or horse ride, and if a Christian is prepared to do those things with them, then they can bring the gospel to them. Often this means that when people have had a positive experience with Christians outside a church building, they may be that much more willing to enter one.

9. Camps can reach more than just those who attend

A good quality camp may be a good witness to non-Christian parents, who can see positive change in their children's lives after their time away. Christian parents are equally encouraged as they find other 'gospel partners' in the work of bringing up their children to know the Lord.

OF COURSE, once camp is over, there is always the danger that the new believer will forget their newfound faith, unless carefully nurtured and supported. Crusaders seeks to link any child who makes a commitment to Christ on camp, back into their local church and encourages them to join their school Crusader or Christian group. **B**

MICHELLE UNDERWOOD IS A PAST EMPLOYEE OF CRUSADERS. SHE IS NOW INVOLVED IN MINISTRY AT ST MARK'S DARLING POINT IN SYDNEY, AND BEING A MUM.

For more information on CRU Holiday Camps visit the Crusader website www.crusaders.edu.au or phone (02) 9874 8933 for a brochure.