

Why We Do What We Do: Biblical Foundations for Camping

The Three Bottom Lines of Camp: Ministry, Business and Community

by Dan Bolin

Running a Christian camping ministry is more complex than running a major multi-national corporation.

What? Being the director of Camp Stick-in-the-Mud is a bigger challenge than running Multi-mega Corporation? No. Not exactly. Not more challenging – just more complex.

Christian camping is complex because it requires success in three different arenas and failure in any one of these means failure in all.

To succeed, a Christian camp must:

Thrive as a ministry that impacts lives.

Pay its bills and operate effectively.

Live in community, expressing the values of Christ. To succeed in the for-profit world, a business needs only have a black number in the bottom right corner of its Profit and Loss report.

In Acts 6:1-7 we find these three critical elements of Christian camping on display in the early church.

Ministry is happening: evangelism, prayer, Bible study, service to the poor, and leadership development are all in play.

Business practices are evident: priority setting, delegation, staff recruiting, limited resource allocation, and empowerment are evident in these verses.

And community is in play as well: self-serving decisions, potential divisions, cultural insensitivity, meetings, collaboration, and unity manifest themselves.

Camps that pay their bills and enjoy a staff that gets along well with one other yet drifts away from its mission of sharing the gospel and serving guests, has lost its effectiveness and fails.

Camps that stay on mission sharing Christ's love and message and enjoy healthy community can be gone next summer if they do not pay their bills and meet their obligations.

Camps that focus on effective ministry and that operate in a responsible manner but live with tension and divisions, unethical and immoral behavior and gossip undercut the authenticity of what they profess.

Bottom Line #1 of Camp – Ministry

In Acts 6:1-7 we catch a glimpse of the early church struggling with the dual roles of proclaiming the message of the gospel and serving others as an expression of the gospel. Throughout the biblical accounts we see Jesus healing the sick and at the same time proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter tells us to speak the utterances of God and serve with the strength God provides (1 Peter 4:7-11). Paul prays for the Colossians to live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:10). Gospel service and gospel speaking seem to be closely related throughout the New Testament.

Peter Drucker said that non-profits exist to change lives. He's right, but we must remember that ministries exist to change lives for eternity. Effective Christian ministries use a wide array of tools to make changes in time and eternity.

Historically, ministries that focus on meeting physical needs have drifted away from their gospel roots. And those that give attention to spiritual needs may become oblivious to the physical needs of people around them. For ministries to be truly effective their efforts must be grounded in the gospel; both what they say and what they do.

The early church addressed this issue head on. Hungry people needed to be fed and the Bible needed to be studied and preached. The leaders realized that physical and spiritual needs were both priorities that required attention. The leaders also realized that they needed to remain steadfast, doing what they were uniquely designed and called to do – pray, study and preach.

In response to the need to feed the hungry and the concern about ministry-drift, the apostles organized a meeting and laid out a plan. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:2-4)

Without neglecting the very real needs of hungry people, the Twelve stayed on task, guarding their responsibility to pray and share the truth of God's word. They chose godly leaders and empowered them (more about this next week) to meet the needs of the hungry. Yet they remained committed to prayer, study and teaching God's word. Both ministries were crucial to the success of the young church. Neither branch of the unified church tried to minimize the importance of the other. Together they provided a comprehensive, God-honoring ministry.

Bottom Line #2 of Camp – Community

The early church faced numerous challenges: distractions from the ministry, limited resources and divisive attitudes. Any one of these dangers could have destroyed this fledgling church. Christian camps face many of the same hazards today. To succeed, a ministry must successfully impact lives, pay its bills, and relate as a Christ-honoring community.

The young church in Jerusalem was comprised of Jews – all Jews; but in some eyes, not all Jews were created equal. Tension developed between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews; one people – two identities; similar needs – different approaches. The Hebraic Jews, those locals who were born and raised in Jerusalem, understood the culture, religion and language and were able to outmaneuver the Hellenistic Jews – those whose backgrounds were in the Greek culture, philosophy and language. The poor and needy Jews in the Hebraic community received the food they desired, but the destitute Hellenistic Jews were bypassed. This unequal distribution of the limited food supply created a division within the early church.

Scarce resources reveal people's true loyalties. Limited food supplies and a growing number of hungry mouths became the point of contention between these two Jewish groups. The locals got theirs and the newbies were left out. "What's best for me and mine?" trumped "What's best for all of us?" Selfish desires came to light when the food supply ran low.

The Apostles understood the danger they faced within the fragile coalition they were developing. They responded by calling a meeting and inviting everyone to participate. And they reviewed their commitment to focus on God's Word. (Acts 6:2)

Next the Apostles involved the entire group by empowering them to select a task force to respond to the issue. The group selected seven people whose names are common in the Hellenistic world; in all likelihood they were members of the slighted, Hellenistic group. People with a vested interest in the problem were tasked to look for a solution.

The leaders of the early church recognized the danger of division and they confronted the issue head-on and openly. They included everyone in the problem-solving process; and they worked bottom up, not top down.

All ministries, but particularly Christian camps, must work to honor Paul's directive, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3) Camp ministry often requires working long hours, living in close proximity, and blurred lines between family and work. These unique circumstances are exacerbated because camps are generally located in remote areas limiting outside relationships. Camp ministries are always in danger of imploding due to the loss of community.

Stay on task and fulfill the ministry, pay the bills, and make sure that Christian community is a priority by striving to *keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*.

Bottom Line #3 of Camp – Business

In Acts 6:1-7 the early church faced a problem that threatened to distract them from their core ministry; they also encountered divisions that endangered the new community. These challenges were resolved by godly leaders who employed some fundamental organizational practices. Centuries later, the business world has adopted these church-based practices as their own.

Business management can be complex and challenging, but much of the mystery is resolved in three basic functions: the management of money (and physical resources), the management of people, and the management of time (which is all about setting priorities and self-management). Each of these is addressed by the early church in Acts 6:1-7. These issues were challenging 2,000 years ago and they are faced by camps and other ministries today.

Resource Management - The early church didn't have enough food to feed all the hungry and deserving people. Two groups held different expectations about how the existing supply should be allocated.

Limited resources can bring out the worst in people. Selfish decisions tend to override good intentions. We generally negotiate what is best for ourselves and those closest to us, even at the expense of others. Our commitment to the total community and the bigger cause must override our self-centered bent.

Camping ministries continually address the challenge of limited resources. There is never enough money, enough buildings, enough campers, enough donors, enough volunteers or any other essential element of camp. But camp leaders are highly skilled at accomplishing a great amount with very little. Good planning through intentional budgeting, controlling costs through effective oversight, and accountability through timely and transparent reporting are essential for camps, and all ministries, to use limited resources well.

People Management – Selecting the right people to tackle the food problem was a major task for the leaders of the early church. They had two requirements for the task-force members; they were to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. The Apostles delegated their authority to the task-force to address the problem and come up with a solution. They knew how to delegate and empower those who met the position requirements and were selected to serve. The Apostles laid hands on them, prayed over them, and then got out of the way.

Camping is a relational ministry; therefore, selecting and empowering the right people is critical. The wellbeing of young children is too important for camps to miss the lead of the early church. Camps need to select people who have godly character and who are prepared to make wise decisions. Once selected, staff members need to know they have the prayerful support, encouragement and watchful eye of their supervisors.

Time Management – The Apostles knew they needed to stay close to God through prayer and studying, teaching and preaching the Bible. They recognized their temporal limitations and knew they could not do it all. They invested their time accomplishing the tasks that were critical and that they were called to accomplish and they made sure someone covered the rest. They had to say ‘no’ to personal involvement in the very important and noble cause of feeding the hungry. The Apostles managed themselves by focusing on their calling and multiplied their results by enlisting others to help.

We all have the same amount of time; we don’t really manage time – in reality we manage (or mismanage) ourselves. We manage ourselves through priorities developed with clear objectives and with a passionate commitment to what God has called us to do. It means saying ‘no’ to the good to accomplish the best. Leaders do not abandon other causes -- they simply encourage the right people with the right gifts to engage the need that God has put before them.

Camps are complex ministries. They require success in three areas

- 1) impacting lives,
- 2) exemplifying a Christ-like community and
- 3) managing well their money, people and time.