

RHYTHMS OF FAITH // PHASE 1

Promising Camp Strategies That Influence Family Faith Practices

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Introduction

The Rhythms of Faith Project seeks to empower parents and caregivers in family faith formation by leveraging the power of camp experiences to establish rhythms of faith through regular Christian practices. Phase 1 of the project sought to answer the question, *“What are the most promising strategies of overnight Christian summer camps to influence faith practices in the home?”* In seeking to answer this question, the research team gathered survey responses from 75 camp leaders from the networks participating in the study: United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries (UMCRM - 12 responses), Lutheran Outdoor Ministries (LOM - 27), and Christian Camp and Conference Association (CCCA - 36). Researchers then selected 20 leaders for follow-up interviews in order to further investigate the most promising strategies.

Survey respondents were advised that the research team was “seeking to engage faith-integrated camping ministries that nurture strong relationships with church/congregational partners and seek to impact family faith formation by accompanying parents/caregivers as ministry partners.” In response to this prompt, only 2 of the 75 responding leaders assessed their programs as “exemplary.” An additional 60% indicated that they were “aspiring and doing well in some areas.” Researchers coded their open-ended descriptions of exemplary practice and identified 8 general categories of strategies (e.g., providing take-home resources). Researchers selected the interview candidates based on the following criteria: robustness and intentionality of the described strategy, inclusion of multiple strategy categories, and uniqueness of the described strategy in comparison to the others. Researchers next ensured that each strategy category was represented in at least two interviews and that there was near parity in number of interviewees from each of the camping networks (CCCA, LOM, and UMCRM). This process resulted in 20 interviews conducted in March and April 2024.

The semi-structured interviews followed a protocol and methodology approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Wheaton College. They took place online and took an average of 52 minutes. A team of four researchers recorded, transcribed, and coded them using reflexive thematic analysis (Byrne, 2022), which resulted in the six themes detailed below.

Study Participants

The 20 interviews included 22 individuals, since two of the participating sites had two leaders participate. They included 8 females and 14 males, ranging in age from their mid-20s to early 70s. They had a variety of backgrounds, with the shortest tenure in their current position of barely a year and the longest of nearly 50 years. Some had been in camping ministry their entire career, while others had previously served in congregations, nonprofits, or corporations.

Of the 20 camping organizations represented, 5 were UMCRM, 6 were LOM, and 9 were from evangelical organizations. Of the latter, 8 were members of CCCA, of which 3 were affiliated with a denominational body (Salvation Army, Evangelical Free, and American Baptist), while the others were non-denominational camps. The camps were located in 14 states, with the majority in the Midwest region (12 camps). There were 5 camps in the West region, 2 in the South, and 1 in the Northeast.





Overview of Findings

The major findings of the study were that: 1) strategies for faith formation beyond camp flowed directly from ministry philosophy and 2) the most promising strategies were contextual and... engaged 3 key audiences: campers, parents/caregivers, and churches. The findings made clear that Christian summer camps were seeking to influence faith beyond camp, engaging strategies to ensure that camp was only part of a young person's faith journey. However, the focus on faith formation in the home was a recent change or a new concept to many of the respondents, suggesting an ongoing paradigm shift in the understanding of the purpose and scope of camping ministry. Even while embodying a philosophy focused on impacting faith formation in the home, many camps adopted strategies focused on campers, while few were making direct connections with impacting families through parents and caregivers. Camps generally adopted the strategies piecemeal, with only a single camp in our sample exhibiting robust strategies covering each of our themes and audiences. Our analysis resulted in six themes, outlined in this report as "promising strategies." Two of these strategies relate to camp philosophy, one each to the three key audiences identified in the study, and the final one to camp leadership.

Strategies flow from philosophy.

The interview protocols focused on examining the most promising strategies identified in the survey, as well as each camp's mission, vision for ministry, and program structure. It quickly became apparent that strategies were directly connected with camp philosophy. Even as interviewers directed their questions to program details or logistics of specific strategies (the "how"), respondents often redirected entirely to philosophy or grounded their answer in philosophical terms (the "why"). As one CCCA respondent explained, "We are so deeply grounded in our mission, I always have to start there." A LOM respondent said, "Through our program, that's probably the biggest thing: if you can't give me a good reason why we're doing it, we need to evaluate why we're doing it." These camps adopted every program and strategy with purpose and intentionality. The strategies were diverse, but certain philosophical priorities were remarkably consistent despite different ministry styles and theological backgrounds. These philosophical priorities are detailed in strategies 1 and 2. Since strategies flowed from philosophy, those that did not consider handing faith off to parents/caregivers as part of their primary responsibility did not adopt strategies designed to influence and empower them.

Promising strategies engage 3 key audiences.

The strategies for influencing faith in the home focused on campers, parents/caregivers, and churches (strategies 3, 4, and 5). Strategies for each audience had two dimensions: at camp and away from camp, as shown in the diagram. These dimensions mirrored the core philosophy of these camps. Though camps varied in program and clientele, they shared common philosophical priorities that undergirded the experience at camp and also saw camp as a temporary space in partnership with permanent spaces away from camp, like home and church.





Promising Strategies by Audience & Space

		Audiences		
		Campers	Parents	Churches
Spaces	At camp	Mealtime prayers Bible study Devotions Leadership & agency	Curriculum during week On camp programming Closing programs Parent training	Engaging in program Church program at camp Supplemental programs Church practices
	Away from camp	Touchpoints Take-home resources Devotional resources	Take-home resources Family devotionals Supplemental programs Targeted communication	Deploy camp leaders Deploy camp programs Resource churches

Camp leadership is adaptive.

Though these camps were selected as exemplars of practice, none of the interviewees claimed to have it all figured out. Their strategies were iterative. During the interviews, interviewees described new strategies they had planned for the coming summer in response to changes they observed in their clientele or new understandings they gained from educational resources. It was clear that many were adopting new strategies for engaging parents/caregivers in response to declines in family church engagement and changes in their own relationships with local church leaders. Additionally, they frequently sought the advice of the interviewers or examples of what other camps were doing. Strategy 6 details this theme of adaptive leadership.





PROMISING STRATEGY 1

Ground your strategies in the core philosophical priorities of Christian summer camp, particularly the integration of faith into all aspects of camp.

All Christian summer camps, and all educational endeavors for that matter, embrace and act according to a philosophy of ministry (Sell 2003). For many, this philosophy is implicit and unarticulated. In our sample, there was a clearly articulated philosophy of ministry that involved an understanding of the fundamental characteristics of a powerful, transformative Christian summer camp experience, as well as an understanding of how Christian summer camps function within the larger landscape of faith formation. These two philosophical underpinnings make up strategies 1 and 2, respectively. Ultimately, these philosophical priorities infused the camp environment, impacting everything from site design and building layout to specific games and details that otherwise might go unnoticed. In one illustrative example, a respondent described using round tables rather than rectangular tables in the dining hall in order to facilitate relational connection and to embody the principle that “nobody is left out.” Another respondent talked about the reasoning behind offering frisbee golf as a group activity that involves a counselor. He said, “[Frisbee Golf] is an opportunity to connect one-on-one or in a smaller group out in the open to be able to hear a little bit more about life stories. Whether it’s a miss on the disc golf course, or whether it’s talking about what other sports or activities are happening, they’re able to talk about faith and talk about life and have some intentional conversation.”

Respondents used language similar to the language used in recent scholarly writing about Christian summer camps, including the scholarship of the directors of the Rhythms of Faith Project (Ribbe, 2010; Sorenson, 2021). The similarity in terminology about camp philosophy was remarkable because of the diversity of camps and camp leaders represented in the sample. In program and structure, some of these camps could hardly be more different from each other. One was a highly centralized Lutheran camp in Wisconsin serving more than 300 campers at a time on less than 40 acres of property. Another was a highly decentralized United Methodist camp in Ohio serving fewer than 70 campers at a time on more than 250 acres of property. One camp that served predominantly wealthy clientele cost more than \$2,000 for a week of camp, while another that served predominantly lower-class and underprivileged clientele cost less than \$500 for a week, with the majority of campers coming on partial or full scholarships; both were CCCA camps located in central California. Although the contexts of camps were vastly different, the programs and strategies were similar because of their shared philosophical priorities.

The most common priority, described in detail in every interview, was that Christian faith was integrated into all camp programs. “We try to incorporate faith throughout everything,” one LOM respondent said, adding, “We say faith development is part of the day 24/7.” A CCCA respondent explained, “Faith formation is integrated into every minute of every day.” A UMCRM respondent described the camp’s commitment to “spiritual growth and renewal” as a core value, encouraging staff to creatively incorporate it “into all of our activities.” When asked to elaborate, respondents gave specific examples of integrating faith into various camp activities, including archery, drama, silly songs, disc golf, canoeing, and meals. Respondents also explained how they structured the camp experience with regular Christian practices, including morning prayer time, worship, Bible study, and evening devotionals. Some even echoed the terminology of the project to characterize these structures, referring to a “faith-based rhythm to our daily flow” or “teaching the rhythms of morning watch” in ways





that can be replicated in the home. Faith was both “formal” and “developed in the daily flow of life” at camp. Since this study targeted faith-integrated camps, it is unsurprising that respondents identified this priority. It is notable, however, because not all Christian camps prioritize faith in this way (Sorenson 2021).

In addition to the centrality of faith, each respondent referred to multiple other philosophical priorities. The most common of these included relationality, participatory learning, unplugging from technology, and immersion in outdoor spaces. Every respondent described at least two of these four priorities, and they were often connected. A UMCRM respondent explained, “My big 3 things that I’ve focused on are building real community, being outdoors, and being off of devices that can distract you.” A LOM respondent connected unplugging with participatory learning: “phones have robbed kids of adventurous play, and camp is the solution.” Participatory learning included interactive games, adventure-based learning, incorporating camper choice into various aspects of camp, and giving campers leadership roles. Relationality included community building among campers, promoting inclusive atmospheres that made everyone feel welcome, and the near-peer relationships between campers and emerging adult summer staff. Ultimately, these camps held fast to what is sometimes called the “essential trinity of camping” – community living, being away from home, and an outdoor recreational environment (Thurber et al., 2007).

These philosophical priorities undergirded the core strategies of ministry that these camps adopted, and they generally superseded concern for follow-up strategies. Camp leaders were primarily concerned with the camp experience itself. Every one of them described camp operations and philosophy of ministry in detail and with considerable passion, but there was generally less enthusiasm and detail when it came to follow-up strategies. A UMCRM leader explained, “I think the vast majority of camps, to be frank, are in survival mode, and that’s an extra they can’t afford time to engage...It would be nice if we could also help families on the back end of camp, but my goodness, we just can’t. We just got to get camp done.” There was a sense from some that camp was enough. They recognized their place within a larger ecology of faith formation (see strategy 2), but they saw their role primarily as providing a high-quality camp experience, with the understanding that these experiences impacted the campers and their families beyond camp, even without more direct follow-up strategies. The respondents in our sample that described robust follow-up strategies, therefore, are quite possibly exceptions in the industry.

Finally, one component of relationality that most directors in this study talked about was related to summer staff members. Specifically, respondents described the emerging adult summer camp staff as the primary delivery tool to ensure that camp philosophy permeated the programming. They accomplished this through intentional staff training, ongoing development, being responsive to staff needs, and monitoring staff health. A CCCA respondent succinctly connected philosophy to staff training: “Our five values within any of our programming are intentional, excellent, Jesus-centered, relational, and camper-focused. And we really drill it into staff during the staff training.”





PROMISING STRATEGY 2

Emphasize the nature of camp as a temporary experience within a larger ecology of faith formation that includes the home and church.

While theme 1 reflects these camp leaders' beliefs about the core characteristics of camp, this theme reflects their wider view of camp within the larger ecology of faith formation. This philosophy is rooted in an understanding of camp as a temporary experience that is intentionally separated from and contributes to life in the permanent spaces. It is reflective of empirical and theoretical literature on faith formation at camp, which often likens faith formation to an ecological process that involves multiple factors and influences (see, for example, Sorenson, 2021 and Botting, 2023).

Phrases like "temporary experience," "liminal space," and "disruption" provide examples of how these camp leaders described camp. At the most basic level, camp is a place for "kids to get out of their own context and environment" (LOM respondent) and a "step away and outside of the norm" (UMCRM respondent). Going a little deeper, a CCCA respondent shared an understanding of how campers "come and live in this experience of temporary community that is guided and directed by a set of values that are wrapped around a deep abiding faith." Another CCCA respondent said, "It's a thin space, and when you remove the boundaries of the permanent system, you are creating so much space for the Lord to get to do his thing and be who he is, and radically transform lives." This separate, temporary reality of camp was a core component of this theme and aligns with the literature on camp as a temporary community or liminal space (Williams, 2001; Ribbe, 2010; Botting, 2023), along with other theoretical formulations of temporary communities (Hirsch, 2016; Miles, 1964).

Understanding camp as a temporary experience was also evident in the ways that camp leaders in this sample openly wrestled with the complex implications of the phrase "mountaintop experience." One CCCA respondent talked about how they intentionally "lowball" the mountaintop aspect of camp because they do not want their campers overidealizing the camp experience. Another shared a concern about campers "falling off the mountaintop" experience. A LOM respondent discussed the "huge God moments" that take place at camp, but shared a desire to ensure that campers understand that "camp isn't the only place where people have faith experiences." Ultimately, this desire to ensure that camps offer powerful experiences while still helping campers understand how the experience connects to the rest of their life helps camps press into a vision for collaboration with other faith formation networks. Therefore, a vision for partnership is the other component of this theme.

Camp leaders in our sample viewed themselves as partners in ministry with other faith influences, primarily families and churches. Respondents used phrases like "parachurch" and "partner ministry" to demonstrate the way that they understood Christian summer camp experiences as an important, but not isolated, faith formation experience. These camp leaders indicated that camp exists to complement, enhance, and contribute to the work that is already happening in the permanent spaces.





Multiple respondents explained that one of their primary initiatives this last year was focusing on communicating a message of collaboration rather than competition. One said:

“One of our big initiatives this year is communicating to churches, that we are not your competitor, we are your collaborator, we are here to labor with you in the pursuit of the gospel, and in the work of the gospel, for the betterment of the kingdom - we're all on the same team here, so we want to come alongside you. (CCCA respondent)”

Another said that they were working on strengthening the bond “between parents and churches on the home front [with camps].” They also shared that they feel they have a “responsibility to create stronger bonds back to the church and family where sustainable faith can continue.”

Because of these priorities, the camps in our sample focused on creating a culture of leadership development and lifelong discipleship in their camps. The respondents made clear that they lean into leadership development largely because they see themselves as a temporary experience that exists to contribute to life in the church and in the home. Through the development of leadership pipelines, intentional focus on leaders in training programs, and focused staff training, these camp leaders indicated that one of the most important things they can offer campers and staff while they are at camp is leadership experience that transfers back home.

Taken together, this second theme describes how Christian summer camps embrace a particular philosophy in order to set the stage to impact faith in the home. The primary components of this philosophy are temporary community, partnership, and leadership development.





PROMISING STRATEGY 3

Engage campers in rhythms of faith at camp and equip them to live as faithful disciples when they leave camp.

Camps seeking to influence faith in the home see themselves as training centers with intentional connections to permanent spaces, such as homes and churches. Clearly present in the interview data, however, were perspectives limiting faith formation strategies to the camp environment. As noted above, several respondents wrestled with the concept of a mountaintop experience, working to justify the set-apart nature of the camp experience, while also connecting it to life away from camp. One illustrative example of this comes from a CCCA respondent:

☞☞ *But it is far more important to also then leave the mountaintop like Jesus did in the transfiguration, to leave and journey back with you and continue growing in your faith. So, you're not just living for the mountaintops. But those are key moments where you get to know who Jesus is maybe in a deeper and a new way.*

The implication here is that mountaintop experiences, such as summer camp, can deepen and even sustain faith during challenging times in life. Another common metaphor, referenced in a quarter of all interviews, related to cultivation. Specifically, camp experiences were likened to planting seeds. The primary strategy here was often passive, trusting that by simply planting the seeds of faith in a child at camp, they might someday “look back on the experience” (CCCA respondent) or “in that moment of adversity, they’re able to remember” (LOM respondent). Like the seed growing secretly in Mark 4:26-29, there was some level of resignation to the role of camp as the one who scatters the seed and must trust in other forces to make it grow. One UMCRM camp primarily relied on this strategy of a passive, supplemental approach, trusting that the permanent spaces of home and church would take care of the follow-up. It is important to note, however, that these were minority perspectives in the data.

Most respondents recognized a need for a more active role in supporting, nurturing, and (to build on the metaphor) cultivating faith in campers before, during, and after the camp experience. One CCCA respondent referenced both the mountaintop and planting seeds metaphors in one answer, critiquing what he viewed as an overemphasis on conversions and faith decisions at camp, noting that these often do not last. These perspectives indicate that promising strategies involve a more active role in cultivating faith, as both training centers and resource hubs.

Equipping Campers at Camp

In contrast to the view of camp as a singular mountaintop experience (such as a conversion or decision) or a more passive strategy of planting seeds that might someday bear fruit, there was the view of camp as a training center. Rather than simply providing faith-forming experiences, these camps intentionally structured the experiences in ways designed to transfer to the home environment. This included teaching methods of prayer, Bible study, and devotions that did not depend on the camp community or context. Three clear examples of this strategy are illustrative of promising practices.

- **Mealtime prayers:** A CCCA camp restructured mealtime prayer from a silly camp-centric approach to family-style prayers in individual camper groups at their tables. Before the first meal, they oriented the camp community to prayer and why they said thanks before meals. The summer staff were effectively trained in the purpose of this method, and they championed it throughout the summer. In their post-camp evaluations, the camp measured a dramatic increase in family prayer that they directly connected to training the campers at mealtimes. different CCCA camp extended





mealtimes in order to accommodate prayer around the individual tables and emphasize the value of family prayer.

- **Bible study:** Two camps (one LOM and one CCCA) provided special Bibles to their campers on the first day of camp that were uniquely connected (in the cover art, for example) to the camp. They emphasized using these Bibles during daily Bible study and at other times during the camp experience, and they encouraged campers to highlight passages. At one of these camps, the counselors wrote special notes to each camper in their Bible.
- **Devotions:** A LOM camp adopted a unique model of evening cabin devotions. They trained their summer staff to structure devotions according to a specific model, and campers practiced this model every evening, with the intention of replicating this devotional model at home with their family. They had used this same model for multiple years. On the last day of camp, they provided take-home resources and trained the parents to use this model.
- **Leadership and agency:** Most camps in this sample gave summer staff and campers leadership roles in worship and Bible study. The increased agency, tied closely to the participatory learning philosophy of camp, was designed to empower campers in spiritual leadership away from camp, whether it was leading their family in devotions or mealtime prayer or participating in church leadership.

Several camps also referred to on-camp programs designed to supplement the overnight camp experience. These included things such as day events or overnight retreats in the fall, winter, or spring.

Equipping Campers After Camp

Nearly every interviewee described post-camp follow-up strategies involving campers. Some of these were perfunctory or seemed primarily focused on promoting a return experience the next summer. However, there were some practices that were promising because of their intentionality in facilitating faith practices in the home. These strategies were divided into three categories:

- **Touchpoints:** These were the most basic of the described strategies, though they showed some promise when done well. They involved specific communications designed for the camper sent at specific times throughout the year. One LOM camp distributed to each camper a Christmas card written by their camp counselor. A CCCA camp used the same strategy for camper birthdays. They accomplished this by having the counselors write personal notes on the cards at the end of each camp session. The camp then mailed these in time for Christmas or the camper's birthday. A variation of this strategy involved the campers writing notes to themselves during the camp experience; the camp then mailed these in the New Year.
- **Take-home resources:** These resources were given directly to the camper at camp, and they generally served both a pedagogical function and as a memento of the experience. It is notable that all three of the examples described in the above section also included a take-home component: written camp prayers, the Bible they used at camp, and an outline of the evening devotional method they used. Another camp provided a physical memento (in this case, a special rock from camp) that campers were instructed to use in personal prayer.
- **Devotional resources:** Several camps provided devotional resources to their campers, though they were not always certain of the effectiveness of their strategies. There were two main versions: a printed devotional (in one example, this was a take-home resource designed to last only weeks after camp, while two others used a service that mailed devotionals to the campers at appropriate times), and an electronic devotional available through the camp website (or email) or using a





mobile app (in development at two participating camps). One camp took this strategy to a deeper level, designing multiple devotional series that built on each other. They created accountability with campers by sending them the next book in the series after they completed and returned the first one.

From a philosophical perspective, camps saw themselves as training centers that could establish and help maintain throughout the year rhythms of faith. Camp was a faith immersion experience, a place to cultivate faith, and a place for faith to imprint in a lasting way. As one LOM respondent put it:

“ I don't think there is anywhere else that can replicate this kind of faith-based rhythm to our daily flow. Kids are immersed in these faith practices, and they don't even really realize that. They just know that they're enjoying it and learning from it. So, I think it imprints and impacts people's faith lives in really profound ways.

This was, of course, a camp leader's perspective and observation. Future research will determine the extent to which this leader is correct about camp strategies impacting the faith lives of campers and their families.





PROMISING STRATEGY 4

Engage, partner with, and resource parents in supporting the faith lives of their children.

Partnering directly with parents/caregivers was a recent shift for many of these camps. For most, this shift was in response to changes in clientele and culture (e.g. lower church engagement among camper families), though there was also evidence that some were shifting out of necessity to maintain or increase their summer camp enrollment. The camps that adopted these strategies did not see themselves as the solution to all of the challenges facing parents, but they wanted to resource and support parents to the best of their ability, a desire in line with the literature that precipitated this study (Smith & Adamczyk, 2021). They worked to involve parents in the camp experience through well-formulated and intentional communication, invitations to participate during and in the final days of camp, and through supplemental programming throughout the non-summer months. One CCCA camp leader said, "I guess one of the cores of [Camp] philosophy is we're really committed to partnering with parents and the raising up with their kids, and so getting parents to join into the progression."

One of the most consistent signs that camps sought to intentionally support families was their inclusion of family camp programs. In contrast to overnight summer camp programs, family camps involve the entire family in multi-day overnight programs. These programs were not the focus of our study, though it is notable that this was the most common theme in both the director survey and the interviews when prompted to give exemplary strategies that engaged families in faith formation. Further research is needed to examine the potential of family camp programs.

Before the camp experience, there was a strong focus on communication. From expectations to packing lists, these camps recognized the importance of parents understanding what their child was about to experience and how they could set them up for a meaningful camp experience. Respondents generally considered pre-camp communication essential but insufficient. They employed the most promising strategies during and after camp.

Engaging Parents During Camp

Most camps had systems to update parents and provide pictures during the camp experience, but their promising strategies went beyond simple updates on how the week was going. A UMCRM respondent described an app that parents download, allowing them to see pictures and stay updated with the day-to-day happenings of camp. They indicated their intention of using this application to share faith-related content, curriculum, and devotional resources with parents, a strategy that other camps in the study were already employing.

- **Curricular resources for parents:** Five camps in our sample sent parents a daily devotional or other family-based curriculum that lined up with what their campers were doing each day of the week at camp. This was most frequently done through an online portal, but there were also take-home variations that parents received at drop-off. A LOM respondent explained the process of moving from simple updates to giving parents an opportunity to "live into it a little bit more": "We started saying, let's send the devotion out to them so that they can see it ahead of time and live into those days. And then that devotion actually has a family activity in it."
- **On camp programming:** Some of the more unique strategies included offering daily tours, inviting parents to participate in a retreat or rent a cabin while their child was at camp, or having camper parents serve as leaders or volunteers in various roles around camp. These strategies were





context-dependent and not practical at many camps, but they highlighted the philosophy of intentionally involving parents in the experience.

- **Closing programs:** More than three-quarters of participants held a closing ceremony/program on the last day of camp designed for parents/caregivers. These varied in length and content, but all were underpinned by the philosophy of equipping parents with tools and resources to support their children post-camp. Many of these were brief programs designed to give a summary of the experience, prime parents for conversations on the way home, and provide a transitional space for campers. However, several transformed the closing programs into parent training, commissioning services, and counselor-parent meetings. The most robust example was a CCCA camp that invited parents for an all-day (6-hour) experience, which included a one-on-one meeting with their child's counselor (including a summary of their week and personal observations of their child's strengths and opportunities for growth). This family day was immersive, designed to give them a taste of their child's experience in order, as the camp leader put it, "to see the spaces and to get to meet the characters who will be in the stories."
- **Parent training:** The LOM camp that trained campers in a specific family devotional model at camp (see strategy 3) carried this strategy to the parents, as well. On the last day, camp leaders met with the parents prior to the campers arriving for pick-up. The leaders trained the parents in the model, including the philosophy behind it. When the campers arrived for pick-up, they practiced the devotional model with their parents as part of the closing program.

Engaging Families Post-Camp

In addition to pre-camp communication and during-camp engagement, camps supported and resourced parents after campers returned home. Most commonly in the sample, this strategy focused on the days and weeks immediately following camp with take-home resources and online messages/content. Many camps in this study thought more broadly about the entire year after camp and sought to work alongside parents throughout the year.

- **Take-home resources:** Several camps provided conversation cues or questions that parents could use to facilitate discussion and reflection on the experience with their campers. This was most commonly a simple reflection guide to work through on the car ride home, though some camps expanded this to include resources for the subsequent days or weeks. Another promising strategy was providing parents with a counselor report of the camper's week, including how they grew at camp. This was a way to provide direct counselor feedback in contexts where a one-on-one camper-parent meeting was impractical.
- **Family devotionals:** These take-home devotionals were generally designed to last for one or two weeks. They usually built on the theme from the camp session, inviting further engagement and conversation. These were in contrast to devotionals designed for the camper individually.
- **Supplemental programs:** Many camps in this study sought to engage families in a variety of year-round and supplemental programs. These included various opportunities for continued engagement, including family fun days, family camp programs, off-season retreats, and community service days. Many camps also deployed staff to local churches for "summer camp days" designed to reengage campers and families directly.





- **Targeted communications:** Participants sought to keep communication channels open through frequent newsletters, blogs/vlogs, podcasts, social media engagement, and virtual engagement opportunities (such as virtual campfires). Some of these strategies seemed little more than marketing tactics to encourage parents to sign their children up for the next summer. However, study participants described these strategies as intentional ministries to equip parents and families, and they included content designed especially for them.

As one CCCA respondent put it, these strategies are ultimately about “passing the baton” from camp to parents.





PROMISING STRATEGY 5

Pursue reciprocal partnerships with local churches.

Church partnership came naturally to many of the participating camps, particularly the ones embedded in denominational structures. However, many of these camp leaders noted stress in their relationships with local churches. The causes for stress in established church relationships included denominational fracturing (specifically in the United Methodist Church), transitions in church leadership that required reestablishing relationships, church leaders who were skeptical of the camp's value, poor communication with churches, and incidents that caused stress (such as a poor experience at camp). For some, these strained relationships with churches led to strategies more directly involving parents. Additionally, there were some camps in the sample (5 of 20) that placed a low priority on church relationships. It was clear, however, that promising strategies included partnerships with local churches in order to influence faith in the home. As with campers and parents, these included strategies both during the child's camp experience and apart from the camp experience.

The most robust partnerships featured reciprocal involvement. In these cases, camps were not parachurch in the sense of being either adjacent or wholly dependent but, rather, integral partners that sought to give as much as they received from church partners. Camp leaders contrasted this robust partnership with a model that was more transactional in nature.

Transitioning Away from the Transactional Model

Several respondents from denominationally affiliated camps described a version of partnership that they noted as a traditional or historical model. Most saw this as either in the process of changing or needing to change. In this model, churches generally provided financial resources for the camp in terms of direct budget support, as well as supplementing camper fees for children in their congregation. The camp provided experiences for members of the congregation, such as summer camp and retreats, which church leaders viewed as beneficial to their faith journey and supplemental to the ministries of the congregation. According to respondents, this largely transactional model of partnership became stressed by diminishing resources in congregations. Fewer children involved in the congregation meant that they could send fewer campers and, therefore, saw diminished value in the camp. Strained finances meant that a congregation could not directly support the camp at the same level financially, which in turn stressed the camp system. An American Baptist, United Methodist, and Lutheran camp leader all told similar versions of this story. These leaders envisioned a new model of partnership that was already exemplified in other camps in the study. The strategies they detailed (both aspirational and in practice) are detailed below.

Church at Camp

These strategies engaged church leaders and congregational programs in the physical space of camp.

- **Engaging church leaders:** One strategy was to directly involve church leaders in summer camp programs, either formally or informally. Formal involvement meant that church leaders were engaged in leading a camp program. The most common examples were leading training sessions with summer camp staff and leading worship or Bible study with campers during summer programming. One UMCRM camp had a "theologian in residence" for each week of camp who came from one of their partner churches. Informal involvement meant that church leaders did not have a specific role that would otherwise be filled by camp staff. Instead, they were invited to be present during the camp experience as observers or co-participants alongside participants from their church. Camps involved leaders both formally and informally, providing space for leaders to engage in different ways. One CCCA camp intentionally tailored the leader experience to the





needs of each church and each leader: “My first question to [church leaders] is, ‘What’s best for your ministry and how do you want this week to be for you?’ We want to serve you.” Several camps provided special housing accommodations designed specifically for visiting church leaders. One of these was a LOM camp that had a cabin set aside for church leaders to use throughout the year, either with their family or on personal retreat. During the summer, they set aside housing for any visiting church leaders to come and be present.

- **Church programs at camp:** Several camps in the study directly engaged church groups and their programs at camp. These included youth groups attending camp together, along with confirmation camp programs in the Lutheran and Methodist traditions. These provided camp-centric aspects of church-led faith formation programs. Notably, some camps only took individual sign-ups, while others worked primarily with groups of campers from a single church or group of churches, and others offered some sort of hybrid. Encouraging groups to come together from a single church (oftentimes combined with engaging the church leader in the experience) was one way these camps intentionally partnered with local churches.
- **Supplemental church programs:** These were indirectly connected to the summer camp experience, designed to serve churches and promote deeper partnerships. They included church retreats for youth, adult groups, or church leadership groups. One camp had partner congregations hold regular Sunday worship at camp instead of in the church building.
- **Church practices at camp:** This group of strategies did not involve church personnel at camp. They incorporated common church practices or specific liturgical language into the camp experience. In our sample, camps designed worship experiences to provide intentional connection between worship at camp and worship in the local church. These were most common at denominationally affiliated camps, where most campers might be expected to have similar church backgrounds.

Camp at Church

This group of strategies involved the deployment of camp staff and/or resources to the church context.

- **Deploying camp leaders to churches:** Many study respondents described traveling to partner churches to lead “Camp Sundays,” lead Christian education programs, or preach during the non-summer months. A CCCA camp leader described their strong reputation for church engagement: “We’ll do things like pulpit fill, we’ll do Awana visits, we’ll do youth group visits, we’ll come and we’ll bring games, we’ll bring activities, we’ll bring cookies. We’re really known for our cookies. People demand that we bring cookies.” Respondents described these opportunities as ways to bring a taste of camp to the local church. This provided a valuable service to churches, post-camp connection with camper families, and a chance to strengthen the camp-church partnership among those who might not otherwise experience camp.
- **Deploying camp programs to churches:** These strategies went beyond Sunday services to support their youth programs by staffing and sometimes running things like Awana and day camp or VBS. Day camp offered a unique opportunity to take the camp model and use it within the physical space of a church, providing an excellent picture of reciprocal partnership. These were especially prevalent in the Lutheran and United Methodist camps.





- **Resource churches:** In addition to programming, promising strategies included equipping and supporting church leaders for their ministry. Examples included take-home resources, follow-up tools, discussion guides, and devotional materials for church leaders. A UMCRM camp described giving church leaders 3 questions to ask campers as they return from camp, which helped reinforce the sense of reciprocal partnership with their partner churches. Other camps provided resources or curricula for church leaders to connect their ministry to the camp programs. The most common example was providing camp music resources, a simple way to enable church leaders to bring a taste of camp into the local church.

Connecting Campers to Local Churches

Camp leaders designed these promising strategies based on the philosophical conviction that camp is a temporary space within a larger ecology of faith formation. Respondents expressed a desire to facilitate connection between their campers and local churches. The above strategies generally assume that campers already have some degree of connection to a local church, but many respondents described an increase in the number of campers who were completely unchurched. Some were actively seeking to facilitate connections. There were two basic strategies for this, one indirect and the other direct. The indirect strategy involved speaking well of the church and encouraging church attendance while the camper was at camp (this might be considered a strategy of equipping campers, as in strategy 3). One CCCA respondent said, "It's a cool doorway for students that wouldn't necessarily want to go to church. But after a week of camp will be like, 'Hey, I actually think I might want to go to a youth group now, or I want to continue being connected to a community.'"

The direct strategy involved intentionally connecting an unchurched camper with a local church. The most robust example of this was a CCCA camp that surveyed campers on the last day of camp to see if they were unchurched and wanted to be connected with a church. If they did, the camp ensured that a church in the camper's hometown was aware of this and had the information needed to follow up with the family after camp. The respondent said, "We truly believe that the best way to help families when they go home is to provide them with a solid church that will also help disciple them and support them." A denominational camp in our sample adopted a simplified version of the direct strategy; they provided campers with a list of local churches and dates for family events in the weeks after camp.

These camps pursued partnership for a purpose: to provide that metaphorical doorway to church involvement.





PROMISING STRATEGY 6

Practice adaptive leadership.

This group of camp leaders exhibited deep curiosity and a desire to learn, both from the research team and from the best practices of fellow camp leaders. “What are other camps doing?” was a common refrain. Camp leaders described things like COVID-19, denominational fracturing, declining church attendance, and shifting cultural values as putting pressure on them and their organizations. How they responded to these challenges set some apart in terms of their adaptive leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 presented significant operational challenges for all ministry organizations, and Christian camps were no exception. Camp leaders worked to find ways to continue ministry, even if it meant altering their long-standing approach. Notably, COVID-19 was a prevalent topic in a small number of the interviews, but others mentioned it only in passing, as a past challenge, or not at all. There were indications that most camps in our sample had effectively adapted and navigated the challenges of the pandemic years, while a smaller number continued to struggle. The difference in tone was striking. The former group mentioned COVID-19 mostly in the context of creative solutions and strategies they adopted to continue engaging campers, families, and church partners through the pandemic years. They even interpreted the pandemic in positive terms. One leader described their shift to more family-centered programs in response to the pandemic: “They [the campers] came up to me and they said, ‘We’re so thankful for COVID because we talked our parents into coming because we knew we couldn’t come alone this year...and now they know something about what we’ve experienced and what we’ve learned at camp.’” Another described adopting more effective communication strategies with both parents and church leaders as part of “what we learned out of COVID.”

In contrast, the other group of leaders tended to focus more attention on COVID-19, and they described it as a cause of current challenges they were facing, such as low camper numbers and lack of connection with local churches. Their tone was more subdued on this topic, and they referred to “the post-COVID reality” in negative terms, with one long-time director saying, “I feel like a first-year camp director, in a way.” Another of these leaders described promising strategies for engaging parents and church leaders “pre-COVID” before acknowledging, “Since COVID, we’ve kind of gotten out of sending those things.” The difference between these two groups related to the pandemic highlighted the impact of adaptive leadership.

Beyond the pandemic, many leaders in this sample discussed the impact of declining church attendance and the way that had impacted their ministry. Across the five denominations represented in this sample, there was strong evidence that most camps could no longer depend on campers coming through a partner church. An American Baptist respondent at a CCCA camp said that many of the churches they have historically partnered with no longer have “enough kids in the church to make it worthwhile” to invest heavily in partnership. Similarly, a UMCRM participant said that they “have a lot more kids not necessarily coming through the church.” A Salvation Army camp leader indicated that their Corps (i.e., local churches) were having a hard time developing their youth programs and getting kids from the community involved. Finally, a Lutheran camp noted declining campers in their partner churches, as well as declining pastoral involvement from the churches. With fewer kids and families in church, the need to partner with families had come to the forefront, thus reinforcing and strengthening the philosophy of ministry discussed in Strategy 2 and operationalized in the strategies with families (Strategy 4). This shift was evident in a summative comment from a UMCRM camp leader: “I feel like we have a lot of work to do in our own minds as a staff, figuring out without the church component what a family and camp relationship needs to look like.”





Some of these camps were historically reliant on a transactional relationship with local churches or denominational bodies (as discussed above), and they were in the process of adapting. This did not mean severing ties with their church partners. In fact, the adaptive responses formed the promising strategies detailed in Strategy 5, leading to a more reciprocal partnership. Rather than these camps relying on churches to send their young people to fill the camp during the summer, the camps began seeing themselves as doorways to church engagement. They also began shifting their approach from a focus on supplementing local church ministry to a combination of church partnership and direct partnership with families. It became clear that the most promising strategies included partnering with both church and directly with the home.

Denominational fracturing, particularly in the United Methodist Church, was putting pressure on Christian summer camps, both in terms of affiliation and enrollment. One camp that worked closely with a lot of churches in the denomination noted that at least 12 of those churches were likely to be lacking clergy members due to disaffiliation, which would also impact their ability to collaborate with camps. Another noted that 17% of churches in their area were disaffiliating with the United Methodist Church. These camp leaders were adopting creative solutions to remain connected with the United Methodist Church and maintain partnerships with local churches that were leaving the denomination. They were also seeking out relationships directly with parents who were unaffiliated with any church or with churches outside their denomination. This was true among other denominational camps, as well.

In response to all these situations, camp leaders were embracing a posture of active learning, seeking out resources, both theoretical and empirical, to better understand the issues and develop an effective ministerial response in their context. These were leaders fully engaged in empirical research. They self-selected for the project, and many were aware of the writings of members of the research team, even reflecting these philosophical priorities in their responses. They frequently mentioned their interest in research, and they were curious to hear the perspectives of the research team. Though the interviews were structured to gain insights from the camp leaders, more than half of them reversed the initiative at some point in the conversation to ask for advice or insights from the researcher conducting the interview. "That's a good question," one leader responded to an interview prompt, noting that their camp was deficient in a specific area related to communication with families before asking, "What are some of the most effective strategies that you are seeing at other camps?"

There were indications in the data that camp leaders were experiencing a paradigm shift, which was leading them to more direct involvement with families through the parents/caregivers of campers. As noted above, some of these strategies focused primarily on marketing, seeking direct involvement in order to address declining camper enrollment. However, these strategies have also focused on influencing faith in the home. The line between these two priorities was not always clear, though it was clear that leaders recognized a need to engage parents/caregivers and expressed a desire to do so.

Even though they were not always sure what to do (leaders used phrases like "actively learning" or "trying to figure this out"), they were open to new ideas. As is evidenced in Strategy 2, they understood that their camp existed as part of a larger system, and they wanted to ensure that they effectively supported their campers to thrive in that system. Two of the primary ways they did this was through learning - reading books and articles, seeking out additional training or consulting, or simply starting conversations with other camps to build ideas - and through evaluation - both before and after camp, these camps were intentional about collecting real-time information from their camper families and from the churches and pastors they worked with.





Summary

This phase of the Rhythms of Faith Project sought to identify promising strategies of overnight Christian summer camps that influence faith in the home. These were self-reported by camp leaders, and they should not be considered exhaustive or more effective than other strategies not included. Subsequent phases of the project will test and refine these strategies, identifying those most effective in influencing faith in the home. The major findings from this phase were that the most promising strategies flow from very specific philosophical priorities, are centered on three audiences (campers, parents, and churches), and depend on responsive leadership.

The six strategies in this report are deliberately ordered and arranged. It was abundantly clear from the data that philosophy must come first. These camp leaders focused on the purpose and method of Christian summer camp ministry, including the integration of faith into the full experience, and they recognized their role as a temporary community in a larger ecology of faith formation. The camp experience came first. From these perspectives came the most promising strategies. The camps in our sample adopted strategies inconsistently, and there were some that did not have promising strategies for each of the three audiences. However, it was evident that the most robust camp strategies should include multiple audiences, perhaps all three. It was also evident that not all strategies would be effective in every context. Camp leaders must attend to context and adapt strategies based on local needs and current research. The promising strategies identified in this study, therefore, should be considered guidelines and examples rather than detailed plans. This is why we have arranged the strategies for each audience akin to a menu of options. A camp seeking to influence faith in the home should adopt strategies for each of the audiences: campers, parents, and church leaders, with consideration to on-camp and away-from-camp strategies for each.

Further research in the Rhythms of Faith Project will examine specific strategies for each audience and shed light on their effectiveness for faith formation. This report is designed as an overview of promising strategies for facilitating faith formation in the home and a strategic guide for camps seeking best practices to influence faith beyond their borders.





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