Inspire and Equip Lives for Love and Justice

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Camp and Retreat experiences provide fruitful opportunities for people to gather and to live together for a time. These times of gathering at our centers dedicated to growth in love has great potential to inspire all guests and guests groups to embrace more life giving practices and to act more justly and lovingly. Our United Methodist Social Principles state the following about community experiences provided by the Church:

The community provides the potential for nurturing human beings into the fullness of their humanity. We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals.
Paragraph 161, The Book of Discipline [1]

We know, as camp and retreat leaders, that the "communal" aspect of our ministry facilitates the possibility for God to transform lives. This is not just true for religiously affiliated groups. Participants with other nonprofit groups can and often do consider the deeper meaning of their lives, as well. We can encourage them and celebrate their efforts to champion what is good along with their commitments to live lives that make a difference within their families and the wider world. Support for those seeking to become more responsive and loving people is enhanced greatly by a community who truly appreciates ways in which people open themselves to growth and service. This dynamic is what makes camp & retreat settings and times so significant and memorable for thousand upon thousands of participants and guests.

Just because a group may not be coming specifically for Christian education does not mean that their lives will not be profoundly touched by God through their contact with us as a place of Christian hospitality and community. If we are intentional, our beliefs and values live and breathe in our interactions and how our site speaks in a great variety of intentional ways beyond leading their sessions. We should be ever cognizant that there are persons within most groups both religiously affiliated and nonprofit who are seeking spiritually. We can nurture and inspire all who come and we want this impact to carry on after they return home, too. A key question is this: How do we make the connection between what happens during camps and retreats and the ongoing Gospel call to love, serve and justice?

John Wesley, himself, struggled with the tension between the dynamics of forming community and the call to engage the world through service.

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[1] *The 2004 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, TN, January 2005) ISBN: 0687350646

For a time John Wesley toyed with the idea of a separated Christian community modeled on early Christian communal living-when "all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common." His comment on Acts 2:45 exclaims wistfully: "It was a natural fruit of that love wherewith each member of the community loved every other as his own soul. And if the whole Christian Church had continued in this spirit, this usage must have continued through all ages." Wesley never quite forsook this dream. And during his last three decades he encouraged "The Community" formed by his followers for social service in London. Soon after the development of his United Societies in 1739, however, he deliberately set aside any plans to organize Methodist monastics. He maintained in one of his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount that "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it." He realized that we must come to terms with the society in which we live, with all its faults.

From Wesley's Principles for Social Action" by Frank Baker, Good News, January/February 1985. [2]

Wesley's decision is instructive for those of us in camp and retreat ministries. His decision against separate Methodist communities reflected his concern that Christian faith not lead to isolationism, as well as his own theological understanding that loving neighbor is essential to Christian practice. It takes seriously the importance of how we help persons return home, as well as encouraging their coming.

The linkage between the Christian community and the wider world is, also, a fundamental reason that we intentionally welcome and serve groups beyond the United Methodist Church through our camp and retreat centers and ministries. Just like local churches, we develop collaborative relationships and joint efforts with other religiously affiliated, educational, governmental, social service and nonprofit groups that endeavor in various ways to improve lives, families and the society as a whole. The vast majority of our guests and guest groups are part of such organizations that have a clear and compelling purpose that contributes to bettering the world. They could not receive nonprofit status, unless their stated mission benefits the society.

As we seek to sincerely learn and understand at a deeper level what our guests and guest groups do to transform lives, it enables us to affirm, support and encourage them at a level far beyond what would be expected from a stay at a hotel, for example. They come to our centers for many reasons, including group building, renewal of leaders, planning, and implementation of their programs and services. The better job we do of nurturing and collaborating with the good they are trying to do, the more we participate in important ways in

[2] "Wesley's Principles for Social Action" by Frank Baker (Good News Magazine, January/February 1985: Wilmore, KY)

spreading love and justice, which is inherent to our understanding of actively pursuing the kingdom of God.

The number of lives touched for the better by the nonprofit groups and church groups that we host and help inspire is incalculable. Identifying these groups as "rental groups" or "other use groups" trivializes the deeper meaning of who they are and it completely overlooks our true mission in serving them. Many of these groups could never afford to establish their own camp and retreat centers. The benefits of such settings are enormous. If we live from deep within our Christian identity, they not only receive a nurturing environment, they gain hosts who become friends in building them up for the contributions they make beyond our centers. When we inspire the leaders of these groups and families for love, justice and healing, it is one of the very important, unheralded ways that the United Methodist Church actively supports the transformation of world. We, also, receive from them many insights and blessings through the relationship.

How then, do we inspire United Methodist and non-profit guest groups to love and service in ways that carry over after they leave our places of hospitality and service? The key to answering this question lies in understanding what happens in temporary community and helping guest groups to make the connection to their own places of community.

Scriptural and Theological Exploration For Camp and Retreat Leaders

A. Make the Connection between the "Mountaintop" Experience and the "Road to the Cross"

Mark 9:2-8 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

The Transfiguration is fundamentally an act of God that reveals God's glory to the disciples who are present. The metaphor for camp and retreat ministries is clear. The disciples have a mountaintop experience where God's glory is revealed in temporary community. Like many of our guests and guest groups, Peter wants to somehow "capture" this experience or, at the very least, prolong it, by building dwellings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

Yet, we know that in Mark's Gospel, the Transfiguration is actually the beginning of the journey along the road that goes down from the mountain, into Jerusalem and ultimately to the Cross. In Mark 9:9, Jesus' command to the disciples to keep silent about the Transfiguration reminds us that God's glory

cannot be separated from God's redemptive suffering. It is instructive that the Transfiguration immediately follows the passage in which Jesus describes the sacrificial dimension of discipleship:

Mark 9:34-35 He called to the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it.

The God who, in Jesus, gave himself away completely for the sake of the world defines discipleship as giving one's self away for the sake of others, even to the point of suffering and death. This is the connection between the Transfiguration and the Cross.

The gospels do not say specifically how the Transfiguration impacted Peter, James and John as they followed Jesus to the foot of the Cross. However, it would not be unfair to infer that it could have been a source of strength for them as they tried to make sense of what was happening in Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion. In the midst of Jesus' humiliation, they could recall the glory they witnessed on the mountaintop and somehow cling to the hope they had in him. More importantly, after the resurrection, the disciples could make the connection between the temporary glory of the mountaintop and the eternal glory of the resurrection.

In the same way, we can help guests and guest groups make the connection between life-changing experiences that occur in community and sacrificial living that confronts evil and death in the world. Perhaps the most significant way we can do this is to clearly interpret to our guests and guest groups that camp and retreat experiences are not ends unto themselves. Rather, like the Transfiguration, they are beginning points, or milestones, on a journey of sacrificial living. They are transformative experiences that inspire us to lives of love and service. Furthermore, when the inevitable valleys of sacrificial living are encountered, the memories of the mountaintop (and perhaps a return for renewal) become a source of strength.

Our Christian guests and guest groups should be able to make this connection without too much difficulty. Other religious or non-religious non-profit groups can understand this connection in terms of the camp/retreat experience equipping and inspiring them for more effective service. In either case, the more we are able to explicitly make the connection between the camp/retreat experience and making a difference in the world, the more our guests and guest groups will be inspired to love, serve and seek justice.

B. Embrace the "Already/Not Yet" Nature of God's Reign

Matthew 4:17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near."

Jesus was clear as to the "already/not yet" nature of God's reign. The kingdom of God is already evident, but not yet completed. Jesus used this tension to simultaneously provide hope for his followers in God's promise to fulfill the kingdom, as well as to challenge them to manifest signs of the kingdom in the present.

Matthew 6:9-10 Pray in this way:

Our Father in Heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are praying that God's kingdom or reign will manifest itself in the here and now, even if it will not be fully complete until Jesus' return. To pray that God's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is to pray that God's reign would be evident, even if only partially, as a sign of God's promise and intent in a broken world.

"…one cannot pray this prayer without committing one's own will and action to fulfilling the will of God in the present and praying that other people will submit themselves to God's rule in the here and now…Rather than mythological attempts to portray the meaning of the "kingdom of God," the prayer expresses the content of the expression as doing God's will."
"Matthew," M. Eugene Boring, The New Interpreter's Bible [3]

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are not just praying for signs of God's reign to be made evident on earth, but we are also asking God to use us in making those signs a reality.

What does it mean to embrace the "already/not yet" nature of God's reign? It is fundamentally about doing God's will in a way that points to what God's ultimate desire is for us and the entire creation. It is God's reign breaking forth into the present reality. What kinds of practices model this?

- Embracing diversity, confronting the evil of racism and confessing the sin of white privilege through hiring practices, board composition and guest policies.
- Practicing good stewardship of the earth through conservation, use of recycled materials, use of renewable sources of energy and use of innovative waste disposal methods (composting toilets, created wetlands).

[3] *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 3* by Choon-Leong Seow, Irene Nowell, Sidnie A. White Crawford (Abingdon Press: Nashville, August 1999) *, p. 204*

- Addressing economic inequality by using fair trade products and educating our guests as to their benefits.
- Going beyond legal requirements for accessibility by showing real concern for and attention to the needs of ALL guests.
- Practicing authentic community that truly welcomes the stranger, values all persons, and confronts injustice and oppression.

The above list is, by no means, exhaustive. Rather, it helps us to think about God's reign breaking forth into camp and retreat life by doing God's will in a way that points to God's purposes and promises.

In the same way, when we are able to model our camp and retreat lives as signs of God's reign, we provide both hope and challenge to our guests - Hope that God will indeed heal the brokenness of this world, and the challenge that God will use our guests and guest groups as instruments in that healing.

C. Covenant to do Love and Justice

Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

"To do justice" is rooted in God's very nature, a chief attribute of which is concern for the poor and the oppressed. Micah 6:8 makes clear that justice making is an activity of the faithful and not merely a theoretical principle. The Hebrew word for "kindness" in Micah 6:8 is hesed, which means covenant faithfulness and/or steadfast love. Therefore, just as God has been faithful to the covenant community, we are to be faithful to God through extending steadfast love. Finally, to "walk humbly" is best translated to walk carefully or circumspectly. Of course, the operative word is "walk," which implies again that what the Lord requires is action, not just belief. But our actions should be thoughtful, intentional and vigilant.

Thus, what the Lord requires is for us to be about the business of justice making through covenant communities and our individual lives which are intentional about action. Encouraging our participants and guests to find and get involved with ongoing justice-making communities is something very proactive we can do, as well. We can celebrate the groups and communities they are already participating with. One annual conference calls them "life-changing communities of compassion." In any event, the key task for us as camp and retreat leaders is to help our guests and guest groups see that community is at the heart of love, service and justice making. We all need communities that affirm and renew our passion for compassion.

Justice cannot happen unless people are inspired and take action to stand with the hurting, the poor and the oppressed, in order to participate with God and those most vulnerable in liberation from unjust suffering. This often begins with

changes in attitudes and lifestyles. Leonard Boff, in his book *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor,* makes the connection between the suffering of people and the suffering of the earth and other species. This is important for Camp and Retreat Leaders to take to heart if we are to fully live out our Christian purpose.

"Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common; they start from two bleeding wounds. The wound of poverty breaks the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people around the world. The other wound, systematic assault on the Earth, breaks down the balance of the planet, which is under threat from the plundering of development as practiced by contemporary global societies. Both lines of reflection and practice have as their starting point a cry: the cry of the poor for life, freedom and beauty (cf. Ex. 3:7), and the cry of the Earth groaning under oppression (cf. Rom 8:22-23). Both seek liberation…" Leonard Boff [4]

Hebrews 10:23-25 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Our guests and guest groups will learn the value of ongoing community if they have significant camp and retreat experiences in temporary community. We can interpret to guest groups that the sense of community or covenant faithfulness that they experience through camps and retreats is also available beyond the bounds of our centers. Such communities of inspiration and encouragement are major assets to living lives of love, justice, and service.

Our own Wesleyan tradition is one of the strongest examples. As mentioned previously, John Wesley decided against set-apart communal arrangements as being too isolated from the world. What he discovered, instead, was the class meeting. This form of meeting on a regular basis to form community through support and accountability was the way that Wesley found for Christians to "provoke one another to love and good deeds." Whether intentionally or providentially Wesley discovered, just as the writer of Hebrews knew, that the only way for Christians to make a difference in this world was to do so as an outgrowth of on-going community.

Modern versions of the class meeting; covenant discipleship groups, Walk to Emmaus reunion groups, Disciple Bible Study and other forms of small group ministry, continue in this same tradition of ongoing justice making communities. One of our tasks as camp and retreat leaders is to encourage guests and guest groups to build upon their camp and retreat experiences in ways that form community. Not community just for its own sake, but for the sake of loving and serving others. Some will find this network of support and growth among friends

[4] *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* by Leonardo Boff (Orbis Books:Maryknoll, NY, 1997) p 104

and family. Others will find community through our congregations. Some will connect with their own faith communities. Others will join people with similar desires to make a difference, through Rotary Clubs, the Cancer Society and other Non Profit groups committed to love, care and service. Many will engage in more than one community inspiring them to justice and compassion.

D. Embrace and Support People Beyond Our Faith Tradition Doing the Work of God

One lesson that Jesus lifts up prominently in the story of Good Samaritan is that we can learn from others about what it means to be faithful participants in the Way of Love that God calls us to. Our guest and guest groups frequently inspire and set the example for us, if we are attentive and humble in seeing Christ at work in their lives and purposes. Jesus, for instance, chooses a Samaritan as the example of one who has true compassion in loving one's neighbor. Jesus does not shy away from reminding people from his own faith tradition that they have something to learn from people beyond their circles about love and faithfulness.

We need to be very careful not to be haughty in assuming we are the only teachers or the only one's to inspire, because some of our guests and guest groups may be our examples and teachers as well. Jesus chose a Samaritan as the central character, because that group was often looked down upon as somehow not as connected with God. A major point of the parable is that those who love their neighbor, those who are compassionate as God is compassionate, those who are sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and those who are faithful can be found in many groups.

Luke 10:25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
26"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"
27He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'[c]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.
"
28"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him,

passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two silver coins[e] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"
37The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."
Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Another example of Jesus affirming the faithfulness of others was his response to a centurion.

Luke 7:1When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6So Jesus went with them.
He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. 7That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."
9When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." 10Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

In summary, inspiring and equipping guests and guest groups for love and service means helping them connect their “mountaintop” experiences to an understanding of sacrificial living as a way of life. It means learning and honoring what they do beyond our center to reflect the loving, life living intentions of God in caring for those in need, doing justice and bettering the world. It involves appreciating and collaborating with them to help them be more effective in touching lives. We do this, in part, when we are able to point with hopefulness to the reality of God’s purposes and promises for the reign of love. We encourage them to continue responding to the challenge of being instruments of God’s love. Finally, we inspire them to connect with faith communities and service

communities beyond our centers that encourage them to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.

Ultimately, hosting and collaborating with the great variety of groups we serve can engage more and more people in affirming the sentiments and actions so beautifully expressed in the prayer of St. Francis.

> Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.
> Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
> where there is injury, pardon;
> where there is doubt, faith;
> where there is despair, hope;
> where there is darkness, light;
> and where there is sadness, joy.
> O, Divine Master,
> grant that I may not so much seek
> to be consoled as to console;
> to be understood as to understand;
> to be loved as to love;
> for it is in giving that we receive;
> it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
> and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life

In so doing, our camp and retreat ministries are a powerful avenue and expression of the mission and ministry of the United Methodist Church.