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MANAGING THE FLOOD WATERS

Summer Camp as Christian Education at Camp All Saints

Pottsboro, Texas | The Episcopal Church

BY *Jacob Sorenson*

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In addition to a national survey, researchers from The Confirmation Project visited congregations, using the research method of Portraiture to understand how confirmation and equivalent practices are practiced in congregations. Portraiture is a method of inquiry that shares some of the features of other qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, case study, and narrative, but it is distinctive in its blending of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraiture first came to prominence in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. This Portrait is one from a gallery that can be found at www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery.

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ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

The Confirmation Project seeks to learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth. These denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Methodist Church. It seeks to provide Christian leaders with examples of good practice and with strategies that are effective in helping young Christians grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Strengthening discipleship includes nurturing faith in Jesus Christ and facilitating youth encounters with Christian traditions (Scripture, creeds, confessions, and practices) to support lifelong Christian vocation. This project is funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and housed at Princeton Theological Seminary.

THE RECORDING SESSION

“Remember, this is for Jesus.”

Sixty-four summer campers, many of them elementary age, were arranged like a choir in front of condenser microphones, and the college-age summer staff members were desperately trying to keep them under control, focused, and on beat. This was no easy task. Exasperation and frustration were apparent. Was this really for Jesus, as the staff member had assured the campers?

We were inside the beautiful white chapel at Camp All Saints, just north of Dallas, Texas. The chapel was gorgeous: a church building, in actuality, that had been relocated to the camp instead of being torn down. It stood like a sentinel on top of a hill in the center of camp. The camp sprawled in all directions, hugging the shoreline of Lake Texoma, which was a staggering 29 feet above normal levels after a series of torrential rains hit northern Texas in May and June. The boating dock had floated away, the archery range was relocated to higher ground, and the low ropes course was under water. Inside the chapel, there was no sign of this chaos or the general chaos you might expect to find at summer camp. The near-100 degree heat was shut outside. It was practically orderly.

We were on take four of recording the song “It Is Well,” and the campers were only singing the second verse and the chorus. The recording would be blended with campers from the other weeks of camp singing the other three verses, thus the need for order and precision. I thought back to the worship service that morning. We had been singing the exact same song in that very chapel, and I was deeply moved as we sang, “It is well, it is well, with my soul!” There is something holy about worshiping with a community in which you feel welcome and loved, as I did in that time and place. “We should have recorded *that*,” lamented the priest sitting next to me. We were in agreement: this structured recording session simply was not the same.

And yet, there was a very special connection to the larger Church. We were continuing a song already in progress, and others would not only pick up where we left off but also join us in the chorus. It was an offering lifted up with other believers

for the sake of the church, the body of Christ. That staff member, whether he was simply trying to get one more good take or he really believed it, offered a theological interpretation.

“*Shhhh!*” Silence slowly fell as the staff member with the headphones nodded in confirmation: “We’ve got it!” There was an outbreak of applause and cheering. Then the campers broke into a new song, almost spontaneously. It was like the floodgates had burst, so great was their enthusiasm. They sang their hearts out to their camp favorites. Some danced by the altar, while one boy beat out the rhythm on a church pew and another started breakdancing in the aisle. The priests and staff members could only smile and join in or frantically try to document this outpouring of the Spirit with pictures and videos. But they will never do it justice. You had to be there, to experience it yourself, to see and hear the campers joyfully singing, “You are alive in us, nothing can take your place. You are all we need, your love has set us free!” They looked free. They looked caught up in the Spirit.

There are multiple forces at work at Camp All Saints. Some are forces of structure and order, passed down in unbroken succession in the Episcopal tradition. The chapel stands as a stately reminder of that structure, keeping at bay the chaotic forces of the world as surely as it provides refuge from the flood and the Texas heat. But there is freedom within this structure, maybe even freedom that strains against the boundaries of the structure itself, like water against a dike. There may be precious few Episcopal churches where dancing in the aisle or around the altar is condoned, but the chapel at Camp All Saints was an appropriate container for this outpouring. Camp participants actively explore faith and life in a distinctly Episcopal community.

Camp is not often seen as a center of Christian education in the Episcopal Church. That is one reason why *confirmation camp* is so rare in that tradition. The summer camp experience at All Saints deserves attention as a model of Christian education closely related to confirmation ministries. The strengths of this model can inform confirmation and equivalent practices at camps and congregations across the country.

CONTEXT

Camp All Saints is just north of Dallas, Texas on the shores of Lake Texoma. The Dallas-Fort Worth metro is home to more than six million people and is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country. The drive to camp takes just over an hour, much of it on a narrow two-lane road with a posted speed limit of 75 miles per hour. The lake, which is actually a reservoir managed by the United States Army Corps of Engineers, is a popular tourist destination. The camp sits on more than 650 acres of mostly forested property that is leased from the corps and boasts an incredible five miles of snaking shoreline. Campers canoeing or kayaking in one of the three large coves encompassed by camp property may get the impression that they are in pristine wilderness instead of on one of the most popular tourist lakes in Texas.

The roughly two-dozen buildings on camp are clustered around a hill, with the stately white chapel near the highest point and at the geographic center of the cluster. The other buildings include two program centers and a dining hall that can seat about 150. These and other



Camp All Saints Chapel

buildings around camp are arranged in a sort of hodge-podge that reflects the history of the camp being passed from the Boy Scouts of America to the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), and finally to the Episcopal Church. The Episcopalians are fittingly responsible for the most orderly of the buildings: the chapel and a village of six neatly arranged camper cabins. Each cabin has two separate housing areas with their own bathrooms and a large common meeting space.

All Saints is a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas, which comprises 77 congregations and numerous educational ministries. The diocese serves as a

conservative and traditional-leaning force in the Episcopal Church. Some priests and others in diocesan leadership continue to oppose female ordination, and the leadership has issued official statements opposed to ordination of gay clergy and same-sex marriage. While some congregations have left the diocese over the years to join more conservative bodies, the diocese has remained largely intact as a minority voice within the Episcopal Church. The newly elected bishop of the diocese wrote, “We remain loyal to our church, even as we remind it that the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’ (1 Corinthians 12:21).”¹

The diocese founded All Saints in 2004, at a time when many church bodies were divesting themselves of youth camping programs. The camp was founded predominantly as a youth camp, with millions of dollars in improvements dedicated to youth facilities rather than adult facilities. This is a significant departure from Episcopal camping ministries as a whole, which have tended to invest heavily in adult conference facilities in the past few decades. The first few years of programming saw sizeable revenue shortfalls and inconsistent leadership. The current director is the fifth in the camp’s short history, and his three years at the camp are more than any of his predecessors. He arrived at All Saints and found that much of the creative energy and financial resources were directed toward outdoor educational programs at the expense of Christian formation and relationships with the churches. He immediately sought to realign the camp with the ministries of the church.

CHANGING THE CULTURE AT ALL SAINTS -----

Conversations with visiting clergy, summer staff members, and campers indicate that the director has been effectively reshaping the ministries in three specific areas: focus on Christian formation and education, connection to Episcopal churches and traditions, and emphasis on summer camp as the central ministry of the camp. The director likened his strategic approach to “changing the camp culture.”

¹ George Sumner, “Traditional Teaching on Marriage,” Episcopal Diocese of Dallas, <http://edod.org/resources/articles/traditional-teaching-on-marriage/> (accessed October 2015).

He sums up the work of the camp, “We work at being a Christ-centered community, and we do it through an Episcopal lens.” Episcopal traditions and teachings become vehicles for faith formation. The mission statement itself is taken directly from the Book of Common Prayer: “To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.”² The camp uses the Book of Common Prayer for group prayers and worship services throughout the day, using the institutional structures to orient camp life towards Christ. The director has also initiated a series of video projects recorded and produced at summer camp that are designed to tell the story of the camp and connect the summer campers to the diocese and larger church. The recording of “It Is Well” in the camp chapel was an important part of one of these projects.

Summer camp runs for four one-week sessions. On paper, this is a small portion of the operations. The camp serves around 300 summer campers annually, compared with thousands through retreats, events, and environmental education. The message of the camp, however, is shifting decisively to a primary identity centered on summer camp because of the director’s firm belief in its value for Christian formation, personal growth, and connection to congregational ministries. The director prioritizes recruiting staff members with a strong Christian faith, another departure from previous years at All Saints. He notes that these cultural changes take a long-term commitment, and while the camp has changed significantly since his arrival, it remains in transition.

SUMMER CAMP AT ALL SAINTS -----

The site visit took place during the second week of camp and focused on the junior high age group, since these are the closest to confirmation age. Campers and staff members participated in focus groups, and the campers completed surveys on the first and last days of camp. Most campers are active church attenders and are either confirmed or plan to be confirmed. Each summer session runs from Sunday to Saturday. Campers are divided into cabin groups of six-to-twelve according to gender and age, and each group is led by two college-age *counselors*. Cabin groups

² Camp All Saints, <http://www.campallsaints.com/aboutus.html> (accessed October 2015). Book of Common Prayer, 855.

do many activities together, though there are numerous opportunities for campers to sign up for activities as individuals. There are also daily large group activities, including chapel, Deans Time, and evening activities.

Camp activities are designed to build skills in nine areas: environmental education, music, dance, drama, sports, games, social recreation, art, and crafts. Campers begin at introductory levels in each of these areas and can later choose which areas to pursue at the intermediate or advanced level. The director explains his philosophy of camp



Campers leading the music at morning chapel

activities, “Everything we do is geared towards giving young people tools they can go back to their church with.” A key example is the music program. Campers learn skills on guitar and percussion that they are encouraged to take back to their home congregations. In addition, they are able to take home a camp songbook with more than 100 songs, including guitar chords. One boy explained, “What’s good about this week is the activities, they’re not just separate. They also involve God.” A cabin counselor confirmed this assessment, saying of the consistent focus on Jesus, “Every aspect of everything that we do, we try and point toward Him.”

Faith is incorporated explicitly into many camp activities and implicitly in the rest, but the formal Christian education time is reserved for the deans. Priests, deacons, and other ministry professionals from the diocese are invited to camp to serve as deans for a week. They lead worship services and coordinate an hour of Deans Time each day. The theme for this summer was “For All the Saints,” and each day featured different saints that were discussed in morning worship and during Deans Time. The two deans leading the junior high sessions the week of the site visit introduced a super hero theme, drawing illustrations from the movie *The Avengers* to talk about using the gifts God has given us to serve the church and the world. Their lessons

were rich in activities, interaction, and small groups. The informal aspects of the camp program, however, served as more powerful learning opportunities than the structured educational time.

Unlike most confirmation programs, Christian education at All Saints is not focused on learning content. The primary curriculum consists of outdoor recreation and living in Christian community, so education is focused on identity formation and life skills. Identity formation centers on several critical life lessons (e.g. *God loves you. You are special. You are important to me.*) that staff members strive to instill in all camp participants both verbally and non-verbally. Life skills include the tools that the director hopes campers will take back to their congregations. All of the educational goals are intentionally framed in the core values of the baptismal covenant of the Episcopal Church.³ Christian practices of prayer and worship frame the camp day and the entire camp experience, and the counselors are trained to interpret the community living and skill development through the lens of the baptismal covenant.

Comments from campers and staff members highlight the pedagogical differences between education at camp and typical confirmation training in the Episcopal Church. Campers described confirmation as a formal process involving a certain amount of instruction time and involvement of the bishop. They understood confirmation in terms of achievement and recognition, and they struggled to connect this with the camp experience, which they described in terms of relationships, new experiences, and personal growth. The summer staff members described confirmation in terms of learning content, which they saw as largely absent from the experiential education at camp. One counselor acknowledged that the counselors gave “instructions about the faith,” but he thought this was different from the formal education of confirmation training. The survey data supports this assessment. 95 percent of campers agreed at the end of the week, “I learned more about God,” but they were much less likely to agree that they learned about specific

³ Camp All Saints, <http://www.campallsaints.com/aboutus.html> (accessed October 2015). Book of Common Prayer, 304-305.

topics. The item that campers indicated learning most about was “experiences of or encounters with God.” This suggests that the experiential environment of camp helped the campers understand what it means to experience God, something that is difficult to learn in other educational environments.

I pondered the tension between the camp experience and the traditions of the Episcopal Church as I gazed out at the flooded grounds of the camp. The dikes stood firm and contained the roiling waters of Lake Texoma because of the dedicated people who ensured their stability. Below the surface, I knew that the floodwaters were damaging submerged structures and reshaping the shoreline itself. The camp experience functions with a tension of freedom and structure, and the container of All Saints provides a rich environment for this dialectic to work in powerfully transformative ways as participants reimagine their identity and their role within the changing church.

EDUCATION AT CAMP: THE FLOODWATERS -----

Participants at All Saints displayed a high level of enthusiasm and energy. Focus group participants repeatedly described camp as “fun,” “awesome,” and “great,” with occasional combinations like “awesomely great.” 100 percent of survey respondents reported at the end of the week somewhat or strongly agreeing with the statement, “I had fun.” Their enjoyment was connected to the themes of new experiences, increased autonomy, and feeling like part of the community.

Many campers acknowledged that if they were at home, they would be sitting on the couch, watching a movie, or stuck on their phone all day. They enjoyed being active at camp, and they singled out separation from technology as a positive part of the camp experience. “It lets you do different things,” one girl said. “Because when you’re just stuck on your phone, you don’t do anything new.” The flooded lake provided novel opportunities even for the campers who had been to camp before. They spoke animatedly about canoeing literally through the treetops, getting stuck among the upper branches of a forty-foot tall oak tree. The Cliffs are usually a place for scenic hikes and rock climbing, but the water had flooded the area to more than



Cliff jumping into the floodwaters

10 feet deep, so campers enjoyed cliff jumping into the water. Campers recounted being challenged and facing fears on the high ropes course, and they reported the accomplishment they felt when they either completed an element or moved beyond their goal. Staff members intentionally challenge the campers through numerous activities and new experiences to help them step outside of their comfort zones. One girl said of overcoming her fears on high ropes, “When I’m afraid to do something, I’ll just do it anyway. Because I pushed my limits here, so why can’t I do it anywhere else?”

A second theme related to enjoyment is increased autonomy. 92 percent of the campers agreed at the end of the week with the statement, “I made an important step in growing up.” The campers recognized the importance of doing things for themselves and taking ownership of their values, including their faith in God. The staff members emphasized that all challenge activities at camp, especially high ropes, were “challenge by choice.” This philosophy extends to faith, as well. Staff members are adamant that they do not force campers to believe but rather give them opportunities for experiences and encounters. Campers are allowed to go at their own pace when it comes to both physical challenges and spiritual growth. This philosophy of autonomy and choice contrasts with educational models common in confirmation training that emphasize direct instruction, where the learners are mostly passive recipients.

The theme that connected all of these experiences was the theme of community. The entire structure of the camp, from the director to the youngest campers, is focused on living in Christian community, which the director connects biblically to Acts 2:43-47. Campers and staff members agreed that they feel cared for, loved, and

included. Campers felt safe to challenge themselves on the high ropes, cry in front of their cabin mates, or talk about uncomfortable topics because they felt safe in their trusted community. “I feel really safe here,” one boy said. “Like, I would go outside of what I normally do, and I feel safe doing it here.” The experiential environment, autonomy, and nurturing community combined to make a powerfully enjoyable learning experience. This powerful experience was carefully guided and structured using the normative faith traditions of the Episcopal Church.

EDUCATION AT CAMP: THE STRUCTURE -----

They sat in a large circle in the common room of one of the beautiful new cabins. Everyone was represented: year-round staff, deans, and counselors. It was rest hour for the campers, but the community leaders were hard at work living out the very community that they sought to model for the young people. They went over the successes and challenges of the previous day, looked ahead to the coming day, and spent time in prayer together. This hour-long meeting takes place every day at Camp All Saints and represents a tremendous commitment to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to be heard and that all conflicts or problems can be dealt with in real time. It functions as one of the primary floodgates, the structures put in place to ensure that the powerful flow of the camp experience is directed to the building up of Christian community.

Camp All Saints is an effective catalyst for faith formation because of the Christian structure inside which the new experiences, autonomy, and community are contained. When the recording session turned into a songfest that saw young people dancing in the chancel area and breakdancing in the aisle, they were experimenting with their faith in new ways. They were not simply young people dancing. They were young *Episcopalians* expressing their faith through bodily movement.

These are young people whose dominant understanding of God is confined to a particular way of being: an Episcopal Church service. The campers were accustomed to talking about God and worshipping only on Sundays, but this was reinterpreted in the camp environment. “It’s like Sunday every day,” one boy said. All Saints uses the

particularities of Episcopal worship to structure the entirety of the camp experience. A lifelong Episcopalian staff member said, “Jesus is no longer confined to church. And I know that’s a problem with a lot of Christian families that I’ve seen, is that you have Jesus on Sunday. And so I think that it’s really good that every aspect of everything that we do we try and point toward him.” A seventh grade girl elaborates, “A lot of people don’t even think about using God as a reference for anything. But I think if they went here, in a snap they’d just think a completely different way about relating everything to God.” All Saints opens campers to the possibility that God is present outside of the walls with the stained glass windows and that they can express themselves within those walls.

All Saints has adopted a unique discipline policy that exemplifies the camp priorities. Corporal punishment or yelling in the home environment came up in the camper focus groups and the staff focus group. Participants directly contrasted these means of punishment with their experience at All Saints, where staff members are trained in a particular model of conflict management. One staff member summed it up, “It’s a method of working through issues that respects the autonomy and dignity of the children themselves.” The counselors do not fix the problems. They facilitate conversations in which the campers themselves work to resolve the conflict or behavioral adjustment. The emphasis that the staff places on this model highlights that the community living itself is the educational curriculum at All Saints. They learn through doing.

The director calls camping ministry “one of the last models of 24/7 discipleship” that exists. “You can’t just go home,” he said. “You can’t just take your ball and leave. When there’s a real issue, there’s a real good chance you’re going to have to work through it.” He knows that many camps have traditions of hazing, pranks, and subtle ridicule of campers who misbehave or do not meet expectations. He is adamantly opposed to methods that demean campers or break down community. He intentionally connects the discipline model to the core values of the baptismal covenant from the Book of Common Prayer, which specifically lift up the need for repentance, “loving your neighbor as yourself,” and respecting “the dignity of every

human being.”⁴ One counselor said of the director, “He sees Jesus in every camper,” explaining that the steps of the discipline model help them to look on every camper with eyes of love and compassion.

THE CAMP AND THE CONGREGATION: A PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION -----

Campers rated 17 identical items related to faith formation on the first day and the last day of camp. There was statistically significant growth in 5 of the 17 items:

- 1 | It is important for me to belong to my church/congregation.
- 2 | I have important things to offer the church and the world.
- 3 | I know what it means to be a Christian.
- 4 | Jesus’ death on the cross offers salvation.
- 5 | I want to participate in the leadership of worship services.

Three of these items are related to engagement with a home congregation. Campers are leaving with an increased sense of belonging to the church, confidence in their beliefs, knowledge of the gifts they can offer the church, and desire to lead. How this growth translates long-term depends on the support they receive from their home congregations and families. Most of the discussions in the focus groups concerned the immediate experience of camp, but several people spoke of camp’s influence on their lives. Significantly, these examples of long-term effectiveness were all retrospective. Campers and staff had difficulty imagining the impact of camp while they were embedded in the experience, but they were able to look back on previous experiences and identify ongoing impacts. This was true for both campers and staff members. One second-year staff member said, “I don’t like the person I am at school, and I love the person I am here. I’m hoping to make who I am here who I am everywhere.”

I was sitting with one of the deans in the empty chapel building. “It doesn’t translate,” she said sadly. “They get back to church and it’s like a foreign language.”

⁴ Camp All Saints, <http://www.campallsaints.com/aboutus.html> (accessed October 2015).

The structured recording session and vibrant songfest had recently concluded, and I thought the passionate singing might still be resonating through the building. I was filled with energy and hope, but she was not. She knew the realities facing these young people when they returned home. Projection screens and praise music would not be allowed in most of their congregations. “You can’t expect camp songs at church,” she said.

The dissonance between camp and congregation was a significant theme in the focus groups. Comments about the church “back home” were almost always negative and in contrast to camp. The differences that the campers brought up include: church is primarily for adults, while camp is for kids; people are happier and friendlier at camp than at church; the teachings are easier to understand at camp; the music is more enjoyable at camp; and the church is strict, while camp is more relaxed. It is encouraging that the survey evidence shows campers have an increased interest in engaging with their home congregations, but there is a lot of work to be done to further the director’s efforts of connecting the ministries of camp with those of congregations and the diocese. One priest said, “People from both sides need to come together and work to bridge the gap.”

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS -----

Christian education at Camp All Saints has significant implications for educational models in other settings, particularly formal models like confirmation training. The focus is less on content and more on experiential or situational learning. Living together day after day, trying new things together, and working through conflict become the primary curriculum. Campers learn about the importance of prayer through praying for each other and the importance of forgiveness through resolving actual conflicts and taking ownership for their own actions. The model demonstrates how powerful community living can be in terms of faith formation and Christian education.

Many models of Christian education, particularly confirmation training, focus on content to the exclusion of experience. Young people may get to know a lot about

God without actually getting to know God. The campers at All Saints had the opportunity to experience an environment in which everything was caught up with and dependent upon the activity of God. Many had the experience of being brought up short and reimagining the activity of God in their lives and in the world. God is no longer confined to Sunday or the church building, and knowledge of God is no longer confined to the intellect. Other models can learn from this the importance of offering extended periods of intentional Christian living, the importance of participating in faith practices outside of a church building, and the importance of incorporating multiple styles of learning into Christian education. The participatory education that involves bodily expression or physical activity seems to be especially effective at All Saints.

Campers left with an increased sense of belonging to the church and an interest in being involved. They were intentionally connected to the larger church through their liturgy and through the consistent prayers for the church in chapel services. The morning and afternoon activities were intentionally designed to help them engage in their home congregations. They also connected to the wider church through their media productions, including a video prayer that was aired at the general convention in Las Vegas. Empowering campers for involvement and leadership in the church is one of the great successes of the All Saints program, and other educational models would do well to learn from, replicate, and build on this program.

There are traditional structures that frame the priorities and practices at All Saints, but the freedom within those structures allows for a tremendous amount of variation. The campers are allowed the freedom to explore their beliefs and play with their ideas of God within the safety of a caring Christian community, and they do so alongside young counselors who are on a similar journey of exploration. The evidence is overwhelming that they do not feel like they have this freedom within the church structures that exist outside the camp environment, and even the church leaders who are passionately supportive of the camping model cannot help but roll their eyes at the antics of the young counselors and campers.

The campers at All Saints are being empowered to work within the church and even change some of the existing structures. The Diocese of Dallas exists as a voice of tradition and conservative change within the Episcopal Church. The diocesan support of All Saints demonstrates an understanding that the Holy Spirit is at work in new and powerful ways both without and within the traditional structures that they hold so dear. Both the diocese and the camp are working to figure out which structures are effectively guiding the flow and which are hindrances. The balance between structure and freedom is an essential dialectic in the educational model at Camp All Saints, and it is clear that the boundaries will continue to be negotiated for some time to come, long after the floodwaters recede.