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WALK BESIDE ME

Christian Education at Stronghold Camp and Retreat Center

Oregon, Illinois | Presbyterian Church (USA)

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.

CO-DIRECTORS

Katherine M. Douglass | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)
Richard R. Osmer | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

PROJECT MANAGER

Kristie Finley | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

STEERING COMMITTEE

Reginald Blount | Garret Evangelical Seminary, AME
Kenda Creasy Dean | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC
Terri Martinson Elton | Luther Seminary, ELCA
Lisa Kimball | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church
Gordon S. Mikoski | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Peter Bauck | Luther Seminary, ELCA
Sylvia Bull | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)
Shonda Gladden | Garrett Evangelical Seminary, AME
Kate Obermueller Unruh | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC
Kate Siberine | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church
Jacob Sorenson | Luther Seminary, ELCA, Camp Consultant

SPECIALISTS

Michael Gewecke | Digital Missioner, www.smartchurchproject.com
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, www.smartchurchproject.com
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, www.designbysarah.net
William F. Lewis | Research Consultant

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 TOWER -----

My socks were wet. We were slogging up a steep wooded hill on a soggy trail. The snow was still visible in patches, but most of it had melted in the mild spring weather of the past three days, turning the trails into greasy mud tracks broken by occasional quagmires. The air was clean and fresh, and the birds were announcing the arrival of spring all around us. It felt great to be outside. We were on our way to a place called *David's Tower*, which sounded like a destination worthy of the *adventure* that our young companions had been clambering about.

It was the final day of the three-day confirmation retreat at Camp Stronghold. Most of the retreat had taken place inside the castle. Yes, it was a *castle*. It came complete with towers, secret passageways, suits of armor, and a great hall where we had our confirmation lessons. On the first morning, we worshipped the Lord in a secret chapel that was accessible through a swinging doorway behind a bookcase in the library. Most of the retreat was less exciting, though. We sat in a semicircle on mercilessly uncomfortable couches for hours during the lessons about church history, Presbyterian theology, and polity. Meanwhile, the sun shone outside, almost mockingly, and the temperature climbed into the sixties for the first time that year. It was freeing to finally be outside and in the company of our two guides, Lydia and Paul.¹ They were a young married couple with a clear passion for the ministry model of Stronghold. They collectively had eight summers of experience working on staff, and their efforts over the weekend had helped make the confirmation retreat feel less like class and more like camp.

Our destination came into view as we crested a hill. David's "Tower" was constructed of drab concrete blocks. It was perhaps seven feet square and about twelve feet tall. My first impression was of a two-story outhouse. I could see the disappointment on the young people's faces: *We came all this way for this?*

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect identities.

Then Paul told the story. David was part of the wealthy Strong family that built the castle, and he began constructing a lookout tower at the outbreak of World War II. It was only partially completed when he went to war. He never returned. Paul indicated the spot partway up the tower where the drab grey blocks changed from one shade to another. David's work had been interrupted at this point, and his family completed the tower after his death. Lydia added that this was the place where they had been engaged. The adventurers took special note of this tidbit. Of all the places he could have proposed on camp, including castle towers, secret chapels, and gorgeous retreat centers, he chose David's



The Adventurers at
David's Tower

Tower. We were in a special place, a place dripping with meaning, and they had shared it with us. I thought about David's Tower and the confirmation retreat as we slid our way back down the hill. David's family had completed the tower for him before they entrusted the property to the Presbyterian Church. Would the young people walking beside me continue the work of the church? Would they find *meaning* in their faith and pass it on to a generation yet unborn?

As two disciples walk the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, they share their concerns and sorrows about the death of their Lord with a fellow traveler. This traveler does not redirect their journey but rather walks alongside them as he addresses their questions and doubts. It is only after much conversation and breaking bread together that the disciples realize they have been in the presence of Jesus himself. They say, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" (Luke 24:32). Stronghold offers a unique Christian education model focused on community building and participatory learning that values accompaniment over direct instruction. It is a ministry that works in partnership with congregations and families to nurture faith formation and Christian education in the lives of summer campers and retreat participants. The Presbyterian Church, Christian educators, and other outdoor ministries can learn a great deal from the ministries at Stronghold, particularly to

value the journey of faith more than the destination of confirmation and the process of learning as much as the content.

CONTEXT: A RETREAT CENTER (AND A SUMMER CAMP) -----

Stronghold Camp and Retreat Center lies in north-central Illinois, just over an hour west of the Chicago Metro. The trip to camp follows the meandering path of Highway 2 along the Rock River. The more than 300-acre property is situated on a series of bluffs, where in several locations visitors can look down on the beautiful river and busy highway. The twin towers of a nearby nuclear plant are visible in the distance, completing the impression that the camp is at the very edge of civilization. Several camp and retreat participants described the joy and peace that comes over them every time they drive onto the property.



The Castle at Camp Stronghold

Stronghold began as a family retreat for the wealthy Strong family, who constructed the castle as a vacation home in the early 1930s. It is an imposing structure with a main section and two long wings that form a lovely courtyard with a fountain in the middle. The walls come complete with arched gateways and battlements, and statues guard the exterior. The interior is equally elaborate.

The tallest tower has a long spiral staircase leading to a landing with a panoramic view of the river. The castle accommodates more than fifty guests, and it is used for both retreats and summer camp ministries.

The Presbyterian Church acquired the property in 1963, when summer camp was increasing in popularity across the country. The summer camp area at Stronghold dates from this early period and reflects the priorities of the primitive, small group camping experience. The summer camp cabins are far from the main buildings and still lack electricity and running water. Stronghold followed the lead of the

Presbyterian camping movement by shifting resources from youth summer camping to adult retreats and conferences in the 1980s and 1990s. The result is a hodge-podge of buildings that includes the castle, a beautiful adult retreat center with hotel-style rooms, a large dining hall and office building, and the primitive summer camp area. There is also a swimming pool, a large open-air pavilion (built over the Strong family tennis court), a high ropes course, and several older retreat buildings that show signs of deferred maintenance.

Financing the camp became a major concern after the capital improvements of the 1990s, and many church leaders began to openly question its value to the ministry of the Blackhawk Presbytery, whose offices are on site at Stronghold. Summer camp numbers and church retreat participation began to decline. The general presbyter assumed a direct role in the operations of Stronghold in 2005, effectively yoking the two ministries. He explained, “Camps are often seen as black holes where presbyteries pour their money.”² A pastor at the retreat described how camps are often viewed as commodities, referring specifically to a presbytery in neighboring Indiana that sold a camp property to divest itself of a financial burden. Even closer to home, the neighboring Presbytery of Chicago sold its camp property in Saugatuck, Michigan to pay for an expensive lawsuit, a decision that left many camp faithful heartbroken. Camp and retreat participants alike echoed the sentiment that the Christian summer camp model feels threatened.

Retreats far outweigh summer camp in terms of sheer numbers at Stronghold. Retreat ministries serve thousands of guests annually, compared with barely three hundred in the summer camp programs. Rental groups and school groups that are not affiliated with the church fill the vast majority of the retreat space. Leadership staff members recognize these groups as opportunities to extend Christian hospitality and to provide much-needed revenue to fund the camp’s year-round operations. Retreat fees and facility rental accounted for nearly two-thirds of Stronghold’s income in 2014. Summer camp program fees accounted for barely 12 percent of total revenue. On paper and from a quick glance at the site layout, it is

² Stronghold Leadership Team, interview conducted by Jacob Sorenson, March 2015.

easy to conclude that Stronghold is a retreat center that dabbles in summer camp. The truth is, however, that Stronghold values summer camp enough to allocate a disproportionate amount of time and resources to staffing and promoting this ministry. The current leadership team, which includes the general presbyter, program director, and operations director, has been instrumental in shifting the focus back to the ministry of summer camp. They describe camp as a place of “theological breakthroughs,” “Christian community,” and “formative life experiences.”³ They value retreat ministries, but they are *passionate* about summer camp.

The confirmation retreat is operated as an extension of the summer camp ministries. Stronghold offers two confirmation retreats in the early spring, which is the most common time for confirmation instruction in the Presbyterian Church.⁴ Visiting clergy members lead the instructional time, so the content and pedagogy vary. Lydia has volunteered at more than ten confirmation retreats over the years, and she described how different they are every time, depending on the young people attending, the weather, and who is teaching. She recalled a pastor who taught the students while making the communion bread together, another who led the students with tambourines and dancing around the castle, and a third who taught almost everything through skits that the students helped to plan and lead. Past confirmation retreats have served as many as sixty participants, but numbers for more recent retreats have been in the twenties. The majority of retreat participants over the years have come from churches with small confirmation programs of less than ten students, often less than five. These numbers are consistent with the Presbyterian Church nationwide. More than half of the Presbyterian Church (USA) programs responding to the Confirmation Project survey had five or less confirmation students, and only 16 percent had more than ten students.⁵ The fifteen

³ Ibid.

⁴ A national survey of confirmation leaders conducted as part of the Confirmation Project indicates that 60 percent of confirmation programs in the Presbyterian Church (USA) last no longer than six months. 35 percent of programs require attendance at a confirmation retreat, and an additional 23 percent offer an optional retreat.

⁵ Ibid.

students in the retreat during the site visit came from six different congregations. Adult leaders and mentors from the congregations also attend, so the retreats are intentionally inter-generational. The site visit had a nearly one-to-one adult-to-student ratio when camp staff members were present. The leadership team described the purpose of the retreat as a *supplement* to what the congregations are doing, noting that it is especially valuable for the smaller churches. “It gives a chance to show, especially the smaller churches,” the program director said, “there’s a greater church out there, and you are really joining something bigger.”⁶ It is evident that Christian education at Stronghold is not limited to a retreat with the word *confirmation* in the title. The camp experience itself functions as an equivalent practice to confirmation. An examination of the retreat experience alongside the summer camp experience highlights Stronghold’s model of Christian education and faith formation.

EDUCATION THROUGH ACCOMPANIMENT.....

The Stronghold camp experience functions as a ministry that is supplemental to the ministries of the congregation and the home, rather than a stand-alone experience. Participants regularly spoke of the places and experiences they came from and those to which they would return, but there was very little sense of *dislocation* that may be expected in novel experiences away from home. “We don’t want this to be a place for the *mountaintop experience*,” Lydia insisted, referring to the spiritual high and life-changing experiences prioritized at some camps.⁷ Instead, she described the ministries at Stronghold in terms of accompanying the young people during part of their faith journey. The result is a subtle educational experience that meets the young people where they are and is incorporated into faith formation in very different ways depending on the home environments and church backgrounds of participants. The two main pedagogical methods that drive the ministry of accompaniment at Stronghold are community building and participatory learning.

⁶ Stronghold Leadership Team interview.

⁷ Retreat Volunteers, interview conducted by Jacob Sorenson, March 2015.

Community building is the primary pedagogical strategy at Stronghold. The experience centers on the small group that eats, sleeps, prays, plays, and worships together. Participants begin interacting with their small group members through games and group building activities within the first minutes of arrival, and they are seldom away from them during the entire experience. Most campers come to camp knowing only a few other people or not knowing anyone at all. The campers place a high value on friendships formed at camp. When focus group participants recounted the best parts of camp and what they would take away from the experience, their answers centered on making new friends.

Key to the community experience at Stronghold are the relationships formed with adult mentors. The summer campers clearly look up to their summer staff guides and interpret what is meaningful about the camp experience largely through observing them. The confirmation retreat also had important relationships formed with adult mentors, but the essential difference was that the adults had ongoing relationships with the young people. The eight adults at the retreat were pastors, lay members in the churches, and parents of participating youth. One pastor said he came to the retreat primarily to build relationships with some of the young people in his congregation. A mother expressed joy that her socially awkward daughter was making friends and interacting with the other young people at the retreat, and she was grateful to share in the experience with her. An adult male shared that he was deeply moved when one of the young people in the congregation asked him to be his confirmation mentor, and he was relishing the opportunity to get to know the young man better during the retreat. The young people returned to a congregation in which at least one adult had shared in the retreat experience.

Community building in the camp environment includes challenging interactions. “At camp, you have to deal with people,” one boy bluntly said in the presence of his cabin mates. “I like to stay away from people I don’t like, but you can’t do that here.”⁸ This problematic is an essential part of the educational experience at Stronghold, and even the campers recognize this. “In life you’re always going to have

⁸ Summer Camp Boys, focus group led by Jacob Sorenson, July 2015.

people you really don't like to deal with," one boy said of working through differences at camp.⁹ Every game and activity contributes to the small group dynamics, and many are designed to provide challenges that the group has to work through together.

This experience-based community building is part of the second major pedagogical strategy of Stronghold: *participatory learning*. "We are not going to give you the answer," the general presbyter said with a smile. "We invite people into a journey to discover what they will discover."¹⁰ This commitment to discovery permeates the educational ministries of Stronghold.



The camp community gathers for a game of 'Big Friz'

Both staff members and campers highlighted the example of group building initiatives, in which campers are given a task and allowed to come up with their own solution. Some campers repeatedly ask, "Did we do it right?" But the goal, according to the staff members, is not doing something correctly or even completing the task, but rather learning something along the way. "You think it's just a game at first," one boy said about activities connected to learning about God, "but then when they explain it, you realize that it actually related really well."¹¹ The *leap of faith* is a high ropes element at Stronghold in which campers climb to the top of a tall pole and then jump off toward a distant trapeze (harnessed into a safety system, of course). Few campers are able to catch the trapeze, but they know that is not the point of the activity. "I feel like that helps you with everything," one girl said. "Not just having the courage to jump off a thirty-foot pole but just to do things that you've never done before."¹² Camp immerses participants in rich sensory experiences like the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Stronghold Leadership Team interview.

¹¹ Summer Camp Boys focus group.

¹² Summer Camp Girls, focus group led by Jacob Sorenson, July 2015.

leap of faith, canoeing, hiking, and stargazing. The retreat participants had an experience of the intimacy of the family of God when they gathered around the enormous dining room table of the Strong family and served communion to one another.

Participants are given the opportunity to take ownership of their learning experience. “We teach, but we’re more facilitators than teachers,” the program director explained.¹³ Campers participated in the leadership of every worship service observed during the site visits. The Sunday worship service at the confirmation retreat was the culmination of a weekend of planning that the young people did in small groups. They poured themselves into the experience, from the music and prayers to the creative benediction. One twelve year-old girl stood during the service to teach the camp song *Every Move I Make*. She explained her version of the actions to the song, and as she got to the line, “Every breath I take, I breathe in you,” she made a wide sweeping motion towards her chest, saying, “You get it? It is like you breathe God into you and he fills you.”¹⁴

Daily Bible study time is also highly participatory at Stronghold. Campers openly discussed their struggles in reconciling religious beliefs with what they learned in science class and wondered aloud about the possibility of animals having spirits. They were given space to discuss these and other pressing concerns without an adult interjecting a definitive answer or shutting down their opinions. The process itself was valued. “It gives them a voice,” the operations director asserted. “It gives them the means to express and to be heard and to be a part of what’s going on, not to just be talked to.”¹⁵ One of the pastors at the confirmation retreat clearly understood the value of camp in this way. She said, “I hope they will return with an idea that their voice is something that needs to be heard in their home congregation, and that they are not just joining because it’s time to join.”¹⁶

¹³ Stronghold Leadership Team interview.

¹⁴ Field Notes, Stronghold Confirmation Retreat, March 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Confirmation Retreat Pastor, interview conducted by Jacob Sorenson, March 2015.

Participants and staff members noted that the participatory style of learning is in sharp contrast to what young people often experience in school or church. “It’s more hands-on learning than textbook learning,” one summer staff member explained.¹⁷ A summer camp girl characterized the difference: “Here at Stronghold, when we have a Bible study, it kind of makes sense. We all share what we think about it. And church, it’s just someone who talks about it, and we all have to try to bear with it or something.”¹⁸ The church can become so focused on *right teaching* that it fails to convey the sense of meaning behind those teachings. This can be especially true in formal instructional periods such as confirmation training. Summer staff members and campers struggled to find points of connection between confirmation and the summer camp experience because they could not envision confirmation training outside of a classroom environment. One staff member explained the connection in terms of contrast, “In confirmation class, it’s more like a classroom setting and whatnot, whereas camp is like you’re actively out there participating and doing it and working through those struggles that you might have.”¹⁹

Campers and staff members also contrasted the tactile and community-oriented environment of camp with a technology-driven world away from camp. Some campers noted that they missed their cell phones, but the majority of focus group participants spoke of the benefits of being away from technology. They said that they oftentimes default to their cell phones or video games at home, which prevents them from being active and getting outside. One girl noted, “Here I get a chance to unplug and just be outside, and I don’t get to do that at home a lot.”²⁰

The combination of *community building* and *participatory learning* is what leads campers to evaluate Stronghold as a *fun* environment. Focus group participants described the fun of the camp experience in terms of meeting new friends, being active, and being challenged. One of the most enjoyable parts of the camp

¹⁷ Summer Staff Group, focus group led by Jacob Sorenson, July 2015.

¹⁸ Summer Camp Girls focus group.

¹⁹ Summer Staff focus group.

²⁰ Summer Camp Girls focus group.

experience was the time on the schedule known as UFT, or *unstructured free time*. Campers are given space to simply hang out with one another and choose what they want to do. Gaga ball, a modified form of dodge ball, was undoubtedly the most popular free time activity during summer camp. During the confirmation retreat, participants used most of the breaks to play *sardines*, a modified form of hide and seek, in the castle. Particularly during playtime, the campers were building community with one another and learning through action. They were learning some of the most important lessons of confirmation training: the value of intentional Christian community, that God is alive and active in the world, and, perhaps most in contrast to their preconceived notions, that faith *matters*.

A FOREIGN PEDAGOGY -----

Stronghold uses a pedagogy that is foreign to many of the participants, and there were many incidents in which staff members, campers, and volunteer leaders simply did not get it. Cooperative games and group building activities were complicated by participants' drive to win or achieve an imagined goal. Participatory learning was complicated by the imagined notion that there is a distinct answer to every question. These dynamics were on full display in the teaching styles at the confirmation retreat.

The bulk of the educational time during the retreat took place in the great hall of the castle, which has a high vaulted ceiling and a massive fireplace in which five kids could stand shoulder to shoulder. This exotic space was transformed into something more conventional. A projector screen blocked the fireplace, and the young people sat facing the instructor in a semi-circle. They sank low in the uncomfortable couches as they listened to a Power Point presentation on the doctrine of creation while creation itself was displaying the new life of spring all over camp. There was a pedagogical irony to the scene that was highlighted when a bat flew over the heads of the delighted young people. The instructor regained order by telling them to keep their eyes off the bat and on him. He acted from an understanding of education that prioritizes covering the material, so a bat is a distraction rather than a teachable

moment. The end goal is valued over the process, the destination over the journey. This is also how the campers and retreat participants understood confirmation itself: as a goal to be achieved rather than a process of learning or a journey of faith formation. The retreat participants later complained about how boring the sessions were. They laughed about not paying attention and about how one of the boys slept through most of the presentations. The bat continued its incursions repeatedly during the retreat, and the young people affectionately referred to it as “Bruce.”

The six lay volunteers who were present at the confirmation retreat offered valuable perspectives of their experiences with leadership in the church. They each shared personal experiences of feeling undercut in their leadership or disempowered by clergy members. Some of the stories were deeply personal and even troubling, yet these adults held out hope that their young people would have faith, and they were present to help empower that faith. We walked together to the much-anticipated Sunday morning worship service, for which the retreat participants had been diligently preparing throughout the weekend. The service ended up being more pastor-led than youth-led. The pastor spoke after every youth-led portion, even explaining in great detail the value of lay leadership in worship services. The shift from accompaniment to a didactic style was unintentional, but it highlights how deeply engrained these patterns are in the church and how much an alternative model like Stronghold has to overcome.

Stronghold’s philosophy of Christian education hinges on the conviction that the primary locus of faith formation lies outside of camp in the home environment and in congregations. Camp provides space for accompaniment and new discoveries in the context of caring Christian community. The experience is supposed to be an extension of church, but it is not clear that congregations know what to do with empowered young people. It is also not clear that the majority of young people who are empowered at camp want anything to do with the church, which campers, staff, and adult volunteers described largely as stale, intransigent, and primarily for adults. The disconnect is troubling because the philosophy of Christian education at Stronghold depends upon strong faith networks outside of camp. With ongoing

support of a faith network, it is clear that the Stronghold experience functions to augment Christian education in ways that some describe as *life-changing*.

TRUE WORSHIP -----

The group exchanged confused looks as the pastor finished the trivia question. The confirmation students were sitting in the uncomfortable couches looking at the projector screen, but this time they were engaged because the trivia game involved competition. The question asked for the term that describes the Presbyterian understanding of what begins when the worship service ends. Lydia smiled broadly. She not only knew the answer, but it was her favorite part of Presbyterian theology. That got people's attention, and they sat up a little straighter. The students liked her, and when she spoke, they paid attention. She had led many of the activities and group building sessions and had taken time to interact with the young people. The following morning, she would lead our adventure to David's Tower, the place she had gotten engaged. "The answer is *True Worship*."²¹

Confirmation training culminates in the rite of confirmation, which often functions as an ending rather than a new beginning. Stronghold offers a model of Christian education that reimagines the goal as the process itself rather than the destination. One of the main lessons from Stronghold may be a critique of the high expectation that many place on a short period of education like confirmation training. Like the Stronghold experience, confirmation training only functions within a larger ecology of faith formation. The hike to David's Tower is instructive. It was never about the destination itself but rather sharing in the experience together. It was through the experience that relationships were strengthened and the campers internalized the meaning behind the place that seemed so unimportant at first glance. Confirmation is not about getting confirmed any more than being Christian is about going to church. Confirmation is learning to walk the journey of faith, the path of *discipleship*, and the young people need travel companions for the journey more than they need correct answers. Without trusted travel companions that can show

²¹ Field Notes.

them the meaning along the way, they see the Bible as an old book, worship services as burdens to be endured, and David's Tower as a broken down building.

The key to understanding the mystery of David's Tower is that it is not extraordinary. It is a remarkably ordinary place that holds great meaning. Stronghold does not strive to be a *mountaintop experience* but rather to show meaning in the ordinary. Camp participants go for walks together, play games, and build relationships with adults and pastors who accompany them. Through it all, they worship God together, discuss Bible passages, and pray. These Christian practices are part of the way of life at Stronghold, and they are remarkably ordinary to the handful of campers who are accustomed to attending church regularly and praying in their homes. For the many campers who are unaccustomed to regular Christian practices outside of the church building, the camp environment is a living out of *true worship*.

Peter had cerebral palsy, and he had difficulty keeping up with the other boys at summer camp. He was a very determined young man, however, and he participated in every activity, even when he was clearly uncomfortable. He did not want the others to feel sorry for him or treat him differently, and they clearly got the message. His favorite activity was swimming because the buoyancy allowed him to keep up with the other boys more than any other activity. During UFT one day, his cabin mates wanted to play gaga ball, so he chose to join them rather than swim with campers from the other groups. He played inspiringly, but he took a nasty fall against the side of the gaga ball pit. His cabin mates rushed to help, but he waved them off and sat out for the rest of the session, clearly in some pain. When it was time to walk to the next activity, the whole group travelled a little slower. Two people walked with Peter, one on each side. They did not take hold of him; they simply walked beside him. Then he reached out a hand to either side, and his companions



Two friends offer a helping hand.

took hold and helped him to the next destination. As I followed, my heart burned within me. Stronghold teaches through accompaniment, through walking alongside people wherever they might be in their journeys. It is a part of the ordinary time in Christian living, and it is an integral part of discipleship and true worship.