**How and Why Going to Camp is Spiritually Transformative**

**By: Rev. Dr. Leanne Hadley**

I have observed and codified a model that I use called, “God Centered Spiritual Transformation.” The model echoes a pattern found in Old Testament Bible stories and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It invites us to structure what we offer to children in an intentional way that guides them through a process in which they encounter deep and lasting experiences of God. It is a pattern that is repeated each time children gather and, over the course of time, deep and lasting spiritual transformation happens. This sets the lifelong pattern for continual spiritual growth. The model gives us a common language or lens to discover possible reasons why some programs lead children through spiritual transformation and others do not.

Camping ministries, has a history and proven track record of being one of the most effective programs in the church for providing spiritual formation experiences for children. I believe that viewing it in through the lens of my model will help explain why it is so effective and why congregations should seriously consider helping their children go to camp each year.

Using the model to identify the strengths and effectiveness of Camping Ministries will also help those of us in other ministry areas to begin discussing how we can incorporate the strengths of Camping Ministry into our own ministry settings.

Below are eight elements that I believe children need to be able to move through this model of God Centered Spiritual Transformation and an additional explanation of how Camping Ministries provides each:

**1) Children need trusting, safe relationships.**

It takes courage to take off your mask and be authentic. Children struggle with not wanting to be different, the need to fit in and the need to be accepted, just as much as adults do. Without trusting the people around them, they are not able to take off the masks they wear, be free to encounter God authentically, and explore the person they are called to become.

And with children, there is an added difficulty… they are dependent on the care of adults and at the mercy of others. A child does not have the authority or power to leave a situation once they are dropped off. So for children, we must provide safe places where adults are carefully recruited, trained and invited to understand the important role they have in building safe and authentic relationships with children. Relationships are the bedrock of spiritual transformation.

\* Camping ministries has a long history of building relationships and creating safety procedures for children to provide emotional, physical and spiritual safety. The role of camp counselor and group leader is especially designed to build authentic relationships between the children and adults leaders and to facilitate respectful friendships among the children. A child at camp is placed into a cocoon of safe relationships where they are free to take off his or her mask and be exactly who they are. There are few places in a child’s world, where this happens so intentionally and where the methods used have been tested and refined for such a long period of time. Plus the length of time spent at camp allows deep relations to be made in a short period of time that can then be experienced year after year as children return to camp in subsequent summers.

**2) Children need to be encouraged to move from what they know and have already mastered into places of vulnerability and openness to discovering, listening and learning**.

This is accomplished through the relationships they have with trusted leaders, through the environment and the activities offered. This is accomplished as the activities are provided that encourage and support children as they push beyond their own limitations (without feeling unsafe), with clear boundaries (so that they cannot stray too far), and at the same time, provide children freedom to explore and discover. Having groups of peers who respect and encourage one another also facilitates this.

\* Leaving camp and going to a new unfamiliar place physically moves children from the places they feel most comfortable and into the unknown. Since the relationships formed at camp happen quickly and because they are formed with such intentionality, children can quickly begin to feel safe, connected and comfortable and are, as a result, free to explore, discover, learn, stretch and grow.

**3) Children need quiet time to reflect, ponder and wonder.**

The scripture is clear: to truly hear God, we must be still. Children need unplugged quiet, slow paced, do-nothing spaces. This does not only mean sitting still in a prayer position. Play, movement, exploration, music, art, and spending time with animals can be places of unhurried pondering and wondering for children as well.

\* The rhythm and length of camp allows times of unhurried, unstructured quiet and the camp schedule often includes times of structured quiet reflection. The lack of TV, electronics and phones creates an atmosphere of quiet. Structured times of quiet such as lights out, the campfires, prayer times and bird watching invite children to experience the beauty and holiness of quiet. Unstructured times of quiet such as hiking, painting, journaling, feeding animals, or sitting alone are also part of the camp schedule that allows quiet times for the children.

**4) Children need nature**

Throughout the history of the Church, people have experienced God through nature. Many of the stories and parables use examples from nature such as trees, birds, seeds, etc. as metaphors for God. The earliest church theologians used nature as a metaphor to describe the relationship of God with us. They, and many of the mystics, believed that God’s transformative power was visible by observing the natural order of everything from stars, to rocks, to lakes, to the weather patterns. Rock formations and caves carved out over time, seeds growing, leaves decaying, the flow of water, the patterns of birds and animals all speak, not only to the creative side of God, but of the rich abundance of God.

Being outside, and given the space to explore, allows children to notice things they don’t usually notice, and to touch, feel and experience God in ways they cannot inside. As things live, die and transform naturally around them, children learn that change and transformation are not things to be feared, but rather, are evidence of God’s continual and everlasting transforming of the world and of their lives.

\* Camping takes children outside and gives them the opportunity and time to touch the earth, notice its beauty and learn about the nature of God and God’s ever evolving process of growth, change and rebirth.

**5)** **Children need to share and be listened to, heard and affirmed.**

The process of spiritual transformation leads to emotions and thoughts that a child has never had before. Along the journey they will rethink old thoughts, struggle with new ideas, ponder things that are triggered by what they see and hear, have brilliant insights and verbalize some things for the first time. To be heard and receive affirmation as they move along means that they will continue the journey, go deeper and further in their discovery of God and their spiritual self and find the confidence to be an active seeker of God’s presence. If their ideas are shut down along the way, they will question their capacity to experience God. The journey will feel too dangerous rather than life giving. Being encouraged to speak authentically, and to be heard and affirmed, will help children get in touch with their soul and begin a lifelong process of spiritual growth and discovery.

\* The training and expertise of camp counselors, as well as the intentional building of friendships between the children, creates an atmosphere where the children are free to share and know that what they share will be heard and reacted to with respect. Having times and places built into the camping experience where sharing is encouraged and respectful listening happens, and having space in the schedule for private and individual sharing, allows children to embrace their true self and grow spiritually with God.

**6) Children need unhurried time to grow and develop.**

A child is a person in process. And we, as people, grow and develop at our own pace and levels. We often try to control spiritual development by setting standards, much like the secular school systems do, but spiritual growth is much more fluid and individual. Children do not need to be pushed or tested. As the respected mystic, Meister Eickhart, once said, “A peach seed will grow into a peach tree.” Trees grow at their own pace and time … so do children.

\*Camp provides unhurried time for children to develop spiritually. While there is a daily and weekly well-planned schedule, there is also freedom from the regular schedules of the child’s daily life. There is free time, creative time, and play time. There is also the awareness that each child is unique and as such, they have different abilities, interests and personalities. While being invited to try new things, there is no preset agenda of skills each child must master to “pass” or get an “A.” Again, there are very few places, including organized sports, school and dance lessons, where children are free to be and accepted as exactly the person they are.

**7) Children need diversity of options.**

One size does not fit all when it comes to children and the ways they experience God. For some it is through quiet prayer, for others through memorizing scripture and for others through play or service or caring for animals or each other. Children simply are not wired to do the same type of activity over and over. They were meant to move, be spontaneous, take naps and eat fun food. No matter how great the activity, children need diversity, choice and variety or they will get bored and loose interest.

\* Camp provides variety. Children are given options and the freedom to choose from many activities. Spiritually, they are also given many ways to experience God… through skits, songs, hikes, journals, quiet time by the campfire, nightly devotions, early morning prayer, and on and on.

**8) Children need to be reminded that they are blessed children of God.**

God calls us all, including children, to be in the world but not of the world. Children have lots of voices telling them who they are, what they should value and who they should become. God calls them to become their best self, the child they are! Our God created them and calls them by name. This is special. They are blessed as a child of God. When children discover and claim their own unique blessing, they will intuitively share it with others. This is true *God Centered Spiritual Transformation* and leads to authentic evangelism as they go forth, knowing who they are, secure in their blessing as a child of God to love, care and be the face of Jesus for others.

\* Camp is a place where children are welcomed warmly, embraced, enjoyed and invited to spend time in the presence of God in a variety of ways and through deep and intentionally respectful relationships. The children are given manageable tasks and are congratulated when they succeed and celebrated for trying when they do not. Children are not simply told they are a blessed child of God they are in an environment where they are treated as the blessed child they truly are.