

Tech detox: Unplugged at church camp

by [Andrew Scott](#) in the [August 23, 2011](#) issue



OFF DUTY, ONLINE: Counselors at Chestnut Ridge Camp use their free time to check e-mail. COURTESY ANDREW SCOTT

With over 360 acres of lush terrain, a lake, an outdoor chapel, a large community garden, a zip-line and a high ropes course, Chestnut Ridge Camp in North Carolina offers activities that engage summer campers with nature, with God and with each other.

But please, if you come, leave your cell phone at home.

As youth become more and more attached to their cell phones and digital music players and to mobile devices that allow Internet access virtually anywhere,

Christian camps are grappling with how to resist the power and presence of this technology. For many camp directors and staff, the problem is not the technology itself but the culture of multitasking and instant communication that makes it hard for campers to pay attention to what is happening at camp and to be fully present with one another.

Rhonda Parker, director at the United Methodist camp since 2001, says campers are inundated with technology.

"We ask people to be fully present at camp," she said. "There has been a cultural shift, and campers have shorter attention spans." They assume that "they should always be entertained."

Chestnut Ridge focuses its mission on "Food, Faith and Farming." Parker has structured the camp around the idea that delayed gratification is a good thing.

"Living life is so much better than watching it," Parker said. "To be attentive to the world takes time, and that can't be cultivated by looking at a two- by-three-inch screen."

Yet Parker understands that camp counselors will continue to text and e-mail while on staff. She said that while most of the staff are able to be unplugged while they are working with campers, nearly all look forward to checking Facebook pages, e-mail and text messages at some point during the day.

Camp Don Lee, sister camp to Chestnut Ridge and one of three United Methodist camps in North Carolina, gives campers a short period each day for using cell phones. Don Lee is situated on the coast of North Carolina and specializes in sailing instruction.

Hannah Terry, who worked as a chaplain at Don Lee last summer, said she did not notice much difference between campers who had cell phones and those who didn't, since phones were allowed to be used for only 45 minutes each evening.

Sarah Brown, who attended Chestnut Ridge as a camper and is now a counselor, said that the majority of counselors understand why cell phones and other media are prohibited.

David Berkey, director of Camp and Retreat Ministries for the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, said that the general rule for United Methodist camps

is that cell phones and social media should not be used to let nervous parents keep in touch with their kids.

Berkey said there has been a lot of conversation among camp directors about the role of technology. He said one of the biggest benefits of being disconnected from digital devices is the opportunity to create new connections with nature, with God and with other people. The resistance, he says, comes from families who want to communicate continually with their children.

"Personally, I think it's possible to say no to cell phones for a week and have kids adhere to it," he said. "Yet for some campers it's like losing their right arm to lose their cell phone."

Kent Busman, director of Camp Fowler in Schenectady, New York, is adamant about resisting technology. "Head, heart, body and soul are all in one place at camp," he said. "That provides a unique experience of community."

"Technology is an addiction, and there is something good about the isolation of a wilderness experience," Busman said. "Camp is the last place where kids can reclaim an intentional space of connection, and it's almost a revolutionary idea."

Samantha Miller, a counselor who has worked at Fowler for several years, says she confiscates about ten iPods a week from campers of high school age.

To meet the need of parents to stay connected to their children, Fowler posts daily pictures of camp activities with explanations of the day's events.

David Peet, director of the Luther Dell Bible Camp in Remer, Minnesota, said he finds that campers are at a loss without something in their hands telling them what to do. Luther Dell is part of the Lake Wapogasset Lutheran Bible Camp, a network of camps in Minnesota and Wisconsin that doesn't have cell service. It offers "a place of stillness and serenity."

Peet recognizes the symptoms of technology withdrawal, especially in his counselors. While most counselors comply with the policy that forbids Internet use while on duty, Peet says most of them spend their off-hours online.

"There is a longing to be plugged in," he said.