

Send a Christian to camp

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What is the most important spiritual gift that we can pass on to our children? What will protect them against the evil welling up within themselves, expressed in the senseless violence they now perpetrate against one another? They need the power of God, the armor of Christ, and the knowledge that their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. How can we give them this, their rightful inheritance, in the face of so many forces that tell them otherwise? We offer here a suggestion for intentional Christian formation on a model borrowed from the Jewish community.

In the mid-1940s, as the smoke of battle cleared over Europe and the grim details of the Holocaust came to light, Jews in the U.S. realized that a new responsibility had been placed on their shoulders. While the number of Jews in the U.S. had steadily increased since the 1860s, American Jews tended to look for leadership and inspiration to the great centers of Judaism in Poland, Lithuania and Germany. Now those centers had been turned into ashes, and American Jews were on their own. The trend toward assimilation in the surrounding culture had to be resisted if the community was to survive. The next generation of Jewish scholars, teachers and lay leaders would have to be homegrown.

In light of this crisis, a group of Jewish leaders led by Mordecai Kaplan of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America developed a new idea. They envisioned a summer-long camp program that would offer the usual sports, crafts and outdoor activities, but would also provide intensive education and formation in Jewish life. They envisioned and went on to create camps that featured daily prayer and 90 minutes of religious instruction six days a week. The classes were taught by seminary professors, professional religious schoolteachers and rabbis who spent the summer at camp with their families. The classes involved homework and tests, and credit for the courses was accepted by the camper's Hebrew school at home. (Children are required to attend Hebrew school six hours per week for five years prior to bar/bat mitzvah.)

At camp the sabbath was observed and dietary laws followed. The official language for all the camp's activities was Hebrew. Counselors were encouraged to speak Hebrew with their campers at all times.

Staff were trained to approach every activity as an opportunity to teach the Jewish way of life. Staff, especially bunk counselors, were carefully chosen for their knowledge of Hebrew, their personal religious commitment, and their ability to serve as role models for the campers.

Before the campers arrived, the staff met for a full week to design the summer's program. Staff were paid well, so the camp could attract top candidates. Seminarians were particularly encouraged to spend their summers on the staff, either as counselors or in other staff positions. Separate staffs of teachers, bunk counselors and specialty counselors were set up so that each staff member could concentrate on her or his own area of expertise, attend to prayer, and enjoy community life. The staff-camper ratio was about 1-5. Classes were organized for staff as well as youth. Everyone studied, helped by a well-stocked library (books were brought in from a congregation or seminary) and a full-time librarian.

The campers were carefully chosen by rabbis, who looked for youngsters with leadership ability. Campers' expenses were subsidized by congregations. Campers were encouraged to return summer after summer, to become staff members themselves eventually and then to become rabbis, scholars and leaders of the community. It was also hoped that some of these boys and girls who met at camp would go on to marry each other, so that their religious commitment would be passed on to the next generation.

Kaplan and colleagues called the camp Ramah, a term that reveals a great deal about their aims. In Hebrew Ramah means "the heights"—a sign that they intended the camp to reflect high goals. Ramah was also the place where the voice of Rachel was heard weeping for her lost and exiled children (Jer. 31:15). The camp songbook was titled Kol be-Ramah ("A voice in Ramah"), a phrase taken directly from the prophet. On the cover of the songbook was a drawing of three children, happily singing, dancing and playing musical instruments, with a chirping bird fluttering overhead. Camp Ramah was designed to be the place where the lamentation for the Holocaust would be transformed into the song of joyous rebirth of the Jewish people.

Camp Ramah opened in 1949 in the north woods of Wisconsin, strategically placed to draw children from the large Jewish community in the Chicago area. Within the next 15 years, camps were established near New York City, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Boston. The movement is still going strong. Recently a camp was opened near Atlanta, and feeder day-camps have been started for eight-to-ten-year-olds. The project has been an enormous success, and has produced not one but two generations of leaders for the Conservative movement in American Judaism. This summer, grandchildren of the original campers will be attending Ramah.

The creation of this Jewish camping program was in many ways unique to the situation of post-World War II Jews. But their effort might serve as example and inspiration for others who seek to form their children in the faith today. The Camp Ramah model may be particularly instructive for mainline Protestants who have recognized that the culture is in many ways toxic for children and that an alternative to Hollywood, Madison Avenue and Wall Street is urgently needed. Passing on Christian beliefs and practices can be that alternative, and it now must be done intentionally.

Many parents look to the church to speak to their children about God. Yet church-school teachers are often unprepared for the task, or have little time and few resources to do their job. Within the churches themselves, biblical and doctrinal illiteracy is often widespread. Youth programs are often oriented toward merely providing wholesome activities—on the assumption that youth are already formed personally and religiously—not toward forging a Christian identity. Today, however, we cannot separate personal from religious formation, nor can we assume that either takes place automatically.

Meanwhile, the world outside the church is often indifferent or hostile to Christian claims. Much of secular culture, which is ready to take hold of youth, is vulgar, violent and materialistic. Assimilation into that culture is all too easy. Parents who give their children over to popular culture at age ten or 12 may never win them back. The time has come for an intensive intervention which helps children to identify themselves apart from the culture.

Perhaps that intervention should be the creation of an equivalent of the Ramah camps. Could mainline Protestants do this? Mounting such an undertaking would first and foremost require a sense of urgency and seriousness regarding the situation of children and adolescents. It would also require the conviction that

passing on the Christian heritage is a way to provide them with the strength and resources to become psychologically and spiritually mature adults who conduct their personal and public lives in the service of God and neighbor. It would require a commitment to educating the whole child.

A residential camping program dedicated to religious education may strike some as sectarian. After all, it sets up an artificial and well-protected environment in which not only distracting but also competing influences are screened out. In truth, this project contains a countercultural element. But withdrawal from the culture is a pedagogical technique, not the underlying message.

At the moment American culture presents enormous challenges for those engaged in Christian formation. The civic virtues of public-spiritedness and concern for the common good are often overwhelmed by powerful business and political interests. Popular culture plays on cynicism, despair and distrust. The civil-society debate over the quality of life and the social responsibility of business and industry often takes place without recognizing the role of religious traditions in shaping the moral character and psychological health of citizens. A Christian educational camping program offers Christians a way to form children as both Christians and citizens. The apparent choice between culture Christianity and sectarian withdrawal is a false one, as is that between being a citizen and being a Christian. While public-spiritedness does not require Christian values, Christian identity fosters good citizenship—though at times Christians are judiciously called to criticize the dominant culture.

Christian embeddedness in and responsibility for the dominant culture is a consequence of the doctrine of creation. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). As God's stewards we are responsible for the earth and its inhabitants, including its social arrangements.

The task of such a camp is nothing less than leading children to God through the texts, music, art, practices and saints of the tradition. The ultimate goal is to give youth the experience of being nurtured and sustained in the body of Christ and to become more embedded in their baptismal identity than in popular culture. If this theological identity is strong enough, it should sustain Christian living whether in the private sector, the public sector, the not-for-profit sector or the home.

The round-the-clock nature of a residential program reflects a broad understanding of Christian formation. Christian summer camps would attend to the moral, social,

intellectual, psychological and spiritual aspects of growth. The cultivation of social and interpersonal skills builds character and is essential for the formation of community. The intimate context of camp provides regular opportunities to help apply Paul's community ethic laid down in 1 Corinthians 8: each person is to exercise self-restraint to prevent others from stumbling.

The need for cultivating basic social skills should not be underestimated at a time when computers and video games isolate youngsters socially from one another and from adults. Camp can be a means of instilling values of fairness, compassion, honesty and social responsibility. Away from telephones, computers and the Internet, children may consider the message of the cross that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25).

Intellectual and social development are not separable from spiritual development. Liturgy, hymns, prayer and Bible study give one a language for interpreting life in theological and spiritual terms, as Ephesians 5:19-20 recognizes. In such activities as learning to prepare worship for the community, youngsters can learn to see to the needs of the community as a whole.

Athletics have a place in such a camp—but not the place they occupy in the win-at-any-cost sports culture. In playing sports in a Christian setting, youth can learn about excellence, cooperation, how to handle failure gracefully, and the responsibility to develop and care for one's body.

Handling money is another area in which youngsters today may receive inadequate guidance. Businesses target young consumers, whether they have money or not. Learning to temper the desire for money and power is not easy at any age. Camp provides an environment in which to consider and see beyond the hold that global capitalism has on us all.

The intimacy of summer camp inevitably gives rise to intense romances. Many youngsters in our culture receive little guidance or support in learning how to love another person and deal with sexual feelings. Consequently they have little appreciation for the emotional and physical risks of sexual behavior. An alarming and growing number of children never experience a loving family of origin that provides the foundation for creating a healthy family of their own. Camp provides an opportunity to articulate Christian respect for the power of sex, the responsibility of protecting another person's body, mind and spirit, and the joy of Christian marriage.

A community that has among its members mature married adults who themselves have a healthy respect for the risks and pleasures of romantic love can provide help that might be spurned if it came from parents. They can help youngsters understand the opposite sex and the vicissitudes of love. They can nurture the skills required for stable companionship, model the value of loyalty, and convey the satisfaction of exclusive sexual love in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Living in community inevitably provides everyone with an opportunity to realize his or her own sinfulness. Surrounded by theologically competent adults who are also psychologically sensitive, youngsters can recognize their own limits and accept those of others. They can learn repentance and experience God's grace in a loving environment.

To succeed, a camp program of this sort must capture the imagination of church leaders who will devote to it the treasure and talent of the community. The program must be compelling enough to turn the young away from video and computer games. It must penetrate the isolation from adults that so often defines young people's lives. Perhaps such a camp would have to begin with the youngest ages, and grow by adding one age group at a time.

A summer camping program like this is costly in time, money and resources. Are our children worth it?