

San Marino Community Church
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“Lessons Learned Around a Campfire”

My daughter is spending the summer as a counselor at a church-related camp in Pennsylvania this summer. She’s following in a long-standing family tradition of camp attendance and counseling. I think most people in church leadership – and plenty of folks in the pews – have had some form of camp experience. There’s something special that happens when we are away at camp and I’m glad my daughter is getting a summer-long helping.

Our own congregation recently enjoyed a Family Camp Day at Lacy Park playing softball, eating hot dogs, and taking time for singing and praying around a campfire. Although it was only for the afternoon and evening, the special camp experience was definitely felt by all. People made connections, laughed and shared together. We felt the presence of God in our midst.

It’s funny how most of us envision a building when we think of our church. And yet, we know that the body – the gathered family of faith – is really the church. The Greek word Ecclesia, from which we get “ecclesial”, means gathering or church. And that’s what happens when the faithful gather around a campfire – or escape to the mountains or the desert or the park – “church” happens. It may not look like what many of us think of as church – there’s no organ or dressy clothes or even coffee and doughnuts! But sometimes shifting the location for the faithful highlights the essential things about being the church: enjoying and caring for each other, serving, laughing, learning, growing, worshipping, and making a deeper connection with our world.

As children many of us memorized Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (KJV) Nowhere is that truer than at camp. Sitting around a campfire or hiking through the trees, or contemplating the words of Scripture in nature brings an immediacy to these things. Christ is present in a different way than inside the four walls of our church buildings.

When I was on a seminary trip to the Holy Land, our professor took the opportunity to read the Beatitudes to us as we sat under ancient trees looking over the Sea of Galilee. The spirit of God made these verses come alive for us. These were no longer just words on a page – they were ideas and feelings connected to the place at which we sat at that very moment. I think of other times at camp when we read the parables at morning watch or parts of the Sermon on the Mount at campfire. I could see in the eyes of the campers that we were receiving in ways we had not expected. Christ was present in our midst and the Scriptures were alive.

But it’s not only outside of the church facility that God is at work. Clearly the majority find deep meaning when gathered in the sanctuary for worship on Sunday mornings, praying, singing, and communing with our Lord. But there is something special about sitting around crackling logs and telling the stories of our faith. Perhaps it is some sort of tribal memory, since this is how we passed along our faith in ages past. The stories of Genesis reveal many unexpected layers when we hear these words told by an elder and, although you may say it is cliché, God’s presence can be felt in surprising ways when we hold hands and sing by flickering light.

So I invite you to seek out other believers. Share your faith in the great outdoors this summer. And continue to share it when your congregation gathers in church. You might be surprised how it will change your experience.