

## From Your Mission West Common Mission Board

### “Positive Possibilities for Mission West Camps & Retreats” by Don Wilson

“Mission West” is an adventure in ministry shared between the Central, Hi Plains and Tres Rios Areas of the Christian Church in the Southwest. To be more accurate, “Mission West” will be a collaboration of sharing and support among the *congregations* who minister in these three Areas.

One important way that congregations already share in ministry and mission, is the Summer Church Camps and Retreats that these congregations provide for the youth and children of our Area churches. Each Area has a long and rich history of outdoor ministry at our beloved church camps: Lake Brownwood Christian Retreat (Central Area), Ceta Glen (Hi Plains) and Black River Center (Tres Rios).

As we speak of the congregations of the three Areas working together as “Mission West,” one early concern being voiced is “*What will this mean for our Area’s church camp site?*” Will “Mission West” end up combining all of the youth from our three Areas, to have church camps and retreats together at only one of these camp sites? Indeed, one such “experimental” camp has already happened this summer (2013), as the Chi Rho age campers from all three Areas came together at Ceta Glen for a “Mission West Chi Rho Camp.” Initial reports from that camp are that the youth campers and adult counselors had a great time together!

At the same time, that combined camp is raising concerns for Lake Brownwood Christian Retreat. Will this facility permanently “lose” Chi Rho camp? What happens when LBCR books another camp, from another denomination or organization, to fill a week vacated by a Mission West combined camp—and then in future years, when that Mission West camp wants a turn at LBCR, the summer weeks are already booked by these alternative groups? These are real and important logistical concerns!

The nine members of the Mission West Common Mission Board share the belief that Mission West will result in a “Win-Win!” situation for many areas of ministry, as our congregations share vision, passion and resources for mission and ministry. We believe that the “Win-Win” potential is very high for our shared church camp/outdoor ministries with our children and youth. The key to this outcome is for all of us to Think Larger, Not Smaller.

Rather than thinking, “What will happen to our Area’s church camp when some of our regular camps and retreats no longer meet here?”—Mission West congregations have the opportunity to think, “How can we, together, offer a greater variety of camp and outdoor ministry opportunities to keep all three of our camps busy hosting Disciples events each year?”

Imagine the congregations of Mission West, collaborating to create some new and exciting church camp experiences, to **add to** the long-existing menu of CYF Conference, Chi Rho Camp and Junior Camp. I (Don Wilson, First Christian Church in Abilene) served a congregation in the Virginia Region from 2004-2008. That Region has a very strong and diverse camping program that can be a model of thinking for Mission West.

*In addition to* the traditional camps mentioned above, the Virginia Region also offers “MADD Camp” – “Music, Art, Dance & Drama” Camp. (The camp also has a Photography element, but it’s hard to add a “P” to “MADD”!) This camp was a favorite for my daughter, as campers focused for the week in one of these areas of performing arts, along with daily Bible study, small groups and worship. On the last evening of MADD Camp, parents and family of all the campers are invited to the campgrounds for a big “talent show” where the campers present what they have worked on all week. The families can pay a fee to stay overnight at the camp, and have breakfast with their campers before journeying home.

Another regular camp in Virginia is “Nature Camp,” similar to a “Camp Friendship” in our Area’s camping history. High Schoolers raise funds during the year in order to sponsor children who otherwise could not afford a week-long church camp experience. At Nature Camp, the high schoolers become one-on-one camp counselors for these special guests. Nature Camp is now directed by a board of high schoolers, with adult supervision “in the background.” My son found his week with his special young friend to be a truly life-changing experience.

Yet another creative church camp in Virginia is the “Triple Camp,” at which CYF, Chi Rho and JYF camps happen simultaneously. The three age groups share meal times and evening worship, and separate out for small groups and interest labs. The age groups rotate swim time, Canteen and organized recreation every day. High school youth pair up with Junior Campers and spend 20 minutes of “Buddy Time” together each day before dinner. This simple time of intentional visiting becomes a highlight of the week for all involved, and the older youth consistently say that the evening worship planned and led by the Junior Campers is the best of the week! When I first heard of “Triple Camp” I was skeptical; three years later I was directing Triple Camp because it was among the best camp formats I had ever experienced.

Just four years ago, the Virginia Region added another new summer camp, “Gap Camp” for post-high school young adults. With a minimum and maximum age limit, Gap Camp has grown from 8 attending the first year, to over 40 campers, thrilled that summer church camp didn’t have to end just because they had finished high school!

One Area alone may not be able to support such a variety of summer church camps by itself, in addition to the established CYF Conference and Chi Rho and Junior Camps. But the possibilities for Mission West collaboration are exciting. As Desmond Tutu said, “We can do more together than we can apart.” With an expanded menu of camping opportunities, there can be enough camping going on for each Area’s camp facility to at least maintain its current schedule of Disciples events. The reality in Virginia is that many youth attend more than one camp each summer, precisely because of the variety of specialized offerings.

This won’t all happen overnight, or with the simple wave of a magic wand. But there are models of church camping out there that encourage us to Think Larger, Not Smaller. Mission West could actually end up expanding and enriching the camp and retreat ministries of all three Mission West church camp facilities. What do you think of these possibilities?

Sincerely yours in Christ,  
Don Wilson  
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