

by Leah Hill

# WHAT KEEPS YOUTH GROUPS COMING TO CAMP

**F**rom California to Pennsylvania, youth leaders agree that camp provides unmatched ministry opportunities and vital spiritual growth. *But why?* After all, that's no big news to camp pros, but what exactly is it that motivates youth pastors to bring their youth groups to camp year after year? From a youth pastor's perspective, what makes bringing kids to camp worthwhile? Youth group messages and studies can be online. Youth ministries already have meeting space, regular gatherings and small groups. Attending camp often requires significant travel. And leaders have many choices for extracurricular events to reach more kids and to take them spiritually deeper. ▶

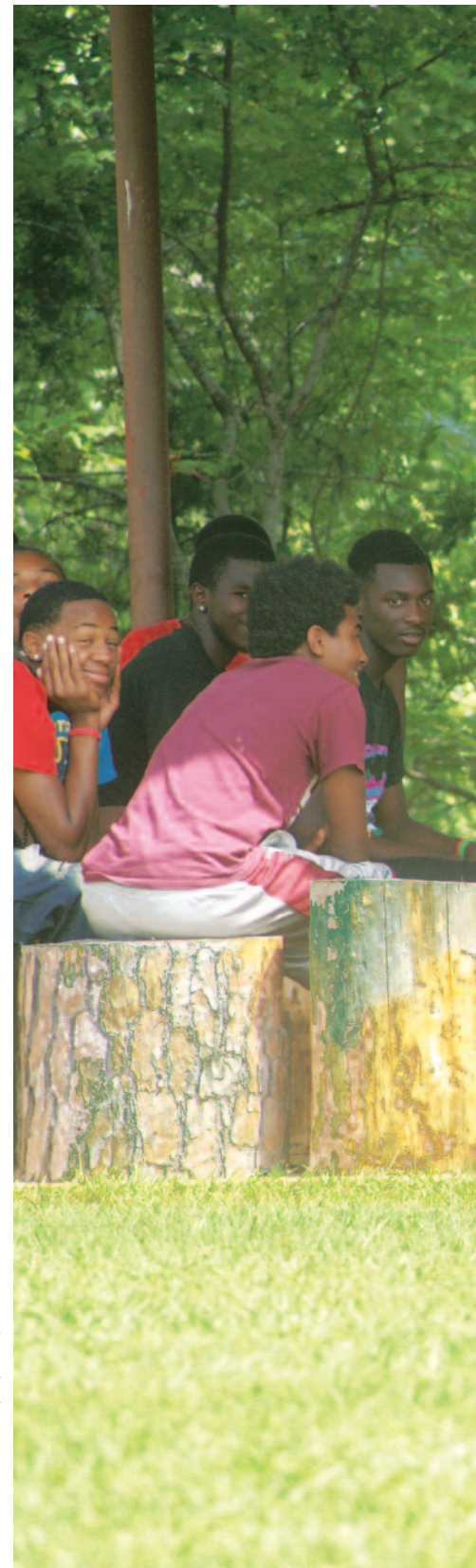


Photo courtesy of Seeker Springs Camps



**WHY YOUTH LEADERS SAY  
CAMP IS AN INVALUABLE PART  
OF SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT**

Still, many youth pastors recognize the invaluable opportunities for ministry and spiritual growth that camp provides. Understanding their needs and reasoning can help camps and conference centers better connect with more youth ministries. Listen in on what brings some youth leaders to camp and what they're looking for in the experience.

## Super Bowl of Youth Ministry

"Camp is the Super Bowl of what we do," says Ryan Callahan, youth pastor at Community Bible Church (CBC) in San Antonio, Texas.

Drawing newcomers to an off-site event with fun activities and a time for spiritual formation is an opportunity Callahan doesn't want to pass up.

"About one-third of our camps are unchurched kids," Callahan says. "That's huge. There's not another event where we draw a third of our crowd that doesn't know God. They'll come because their friends come, and that is our perfect opportunity to share the gospel."

Time away from a regular routine allows for "relational realignment," as Callahan calls it, and gives campers the chance to get to know God and their peers on a personal level.

"They really start to open up with the counselors and with their pastors," he says. "They feel safe."

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attended Camp Tejas (Giddings, Texas) last summer, the stories of changed lives are still fresh in Callahan's mind. "I could probably tell you a hundred stories of students who finally gave up that one thing holding them back from pursuing Christ," he says.

Those kinds of experiences are the reasons CBC allocates funds to camp each year. In an era when many churches only budget 15 percent to youth programs, CBC makes youth a priority. The senior and executive pastors regularly visit CBC camps to invest in the students and see just how important those few days away can be. CBC's chief financial officer went to visit camp this summer too.

"He was blown away," Callahan says. "He was like, 'I've never seen anything like this before.'"

When camp is over and the students return recharged and realigned in their relationships, Callahan is left in awe. "It creates a sense of, *Wow, this is why we do what we do,*" he says.

## Priority One

With budgets tight, not all youth pastors have the backing of the financial decision-makers. But as Derik Idol of 12Stone Church in Lawrenceville, Ga., found, when you look past the numbers on the paper, the case for camp is clear.

"I'm curious where you gave your life to Christ," Idol asked his 12Stone Church student ministries team. They had a decision to make. The possibility of bringing kids to summer camp was on the table, and only a few members were in support. He looked around the room at the eight other members.

"Every staff member that was in that room from our church had given their life to Christ at a youth camp," Idol says.

The decision was clear. While camp may last only a week or two in the

### EXTRA INFO

## YOUTH WORKERS KNOW THE POWER OF CAMP

During 2016, The Power of Camp will be focusing on church leaders—especially youth workers. Youth workers have told us that camp provides a missing component of their youth ministry. They use camp as a feeder system for their youth groups knowing it is easier to get a spiritually disinterested kid to go to camp than to visit youth group. They use camp to grow their emerging leaders and as a discipleship tool. Camp also provides youth workers with an important opportunity to put a stake in the ground spiritually with their kids. At camp, significant decisions are made by young people, ministries are birthed and lifelong commitments to service are solidified.

Watch for youth worker stories on social media and in other CCA publications this spring.

the power  
of camp

summer, the impact is far-reaching. The momentum built from camp carries over into the school year. Students are excited. The tone is set for the rest of the year, and lives are changed for eternity.

## Time (And Money) Well Spent

At LCBC (Lives Changed by Christ) Church in Manheim, Pa., discipleship is a strong part of the youth ministry. Chad Herman, student ministries director, says building relationships and spiritually encouraging one another within a camp setting is a “relational microwave.”

“[Camp] provides this huge chunk of time with students,” Cara Sahd, student events coordinator, says. “We don’t get that time on a weekend.”

With an opportunity as valuable as camp, LCBC prioritizes funding camp.

“Ultimately, you put your money with what’s important—and life change is incredibly important to us,” Herman says. “We want to pull out all the stops for students to experience the life change of Jesus Christ.”

## Ministry Moments

Caleb Aldridge, youth pastor at Lakewood Church in Texas, was a camper throughout middle school and high school. The youth group structure at Lakewood is primarily focused on events with activities for students. That’s why stepping away from the busyness and into a calm environment is so beneficial.

“Summer camp always creates that atmosphere for change or growth or something special to happen,” Aldridge says. “Having that time set apart is huge for students to encounter and grow.”

Aldridge considers camp one of the most fun times of the summer. And as he recalls the ways his students have changed through camp, he says, “They talked about how it got real for them at a summer camp because they responded to what they knew God was calling them to. At a summer camp, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a greater ministry moment than when the student can hear the voice of God and can do something about it.”

## Welcoming Diversity

“We see a huge value in gathering our community into the ‘wilderness’ for a few days,” says Dru Teves from The Rock Church in Point Loma, Calif.

The ministry team behind The Rock youth values

### EXTRA INFO

## THE FIVE C’S OF CAMP

Important factors youth pastors look for in a camp, as adapted from Pastor Dru Teves, The Rock Church (Point Loma, Calif.).

- 1. Cost:** Will this camp be affordable for our students?
- 2. Care:** How well will students be cared for by the staff and leaders?
- 3. Closeness:** Is the distance feasible for our budget?
- 4. Content:** What is being spiritually taught? Will the focus be on Jesus? Who is speaking?
- 5. Crazy Activities:** What will draw our students? Do they have a pool, lake, large field or team games?

camp because it meets the needs of their diverse community of families and teens. Teves and his team have programmed their own camps and have sent students to a camp run by an organization. Either format, activities for a wide variety of interests and a designated time for growth are what keep The Rock youth coming back to camp.

## Trajectory Change

Nearly all the youth pastors we talked with agree that eliminating distractions and having time to process life were reasons for returning to camp. “[Kids can] talk through what God is actually doing in their hearts, in their minds and in their lives,” Idol says.

Whatever the venue or activities, it’s the heart of Christian camping—and youth ministry—that pulls youth pastors back to camp: transforming lives for Jesus.

“They give their lives to Christ, their eyes are opened and the trajectory of their lives is changed,” Idol says.

When it’s all said and done, that is the power of camp. ●

EVERY STAFF MEMBER THAT WAS IN THAT ROOM FROM OUR CHURCH HAD GIVEN THEIR LIFE TO CHRIST AT A YOUTH CAMP.



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