

RAINBOW TRAIL LUTHERAN CAMP PROGRAM:  
OUR PHILOSOPHY BROUGHT TO LIFE

by

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The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has identified camping in the Church as “an organized, Christ-centered experience which implements the ministry of the church by offering opportunities for growth, under trained leadership, through a program of activities related to an outdoor environment, in order that each camper might:

- a. relate to sympathetic adult Christians;
- b. explore the meaning of who he or she is in the light of God’s Word;
- c. experience Christian group living; and
- d. learn how to respond to God’s call to service.”

Certainly this could be a starting point as an attempt is made to define the precepts of Christian camping. Church-related camping is an extension of the Church. At its best, Church camping is a part of the year-round Christian experience of the people in the parish. It provides the opportunity for living out Christian experiences in a community of like-minded people with leadership offering direction and guidance.

At Rainbow Trail, we say that our camp program is best described in these statements:

It’s **RENEWAL**. A place apart. An opportunity to come away... to open God’s word... to find one’s place in God’s plan.

It’s **ENCOUNTER**. In a small group... with others... with oneself... with God. It is an opportunity to discover who we are as a part of a community, and as a part of creation. It is an opportunity to evaluate oneself as a child of God, taking into consideration all of our weaknesses and strengths. It’s a chance to encounter our Lord, through prayer, worship, study, and meditation.

It’s **WITNESS**. It is a time and place where one can learn to focus on faith, identify beliefs, and learn to share them with others... through worship, in conversation, and in study.

It’s **INVOLVEMENT**. It’s a place where people plan activities together, and where all joyously participate in carrying out those plans.

It’s **PROGRAM**. Program, meaning the entire camping experience... activities, sunshine, friends, study, worship, rain, joy, games, campfires, learning, singing, working, sharing, waking, sleeping, praying, celebrating and playing.

## Three Phases of Responsibility to Our Campers

Rainbow Trail looks at camping in three phases as it is seen supplementing the on-going church program:

**The first phase is the preparation prior to the actual camping experience.** This involves promotion of the camp, enlisting the support of parents, registration, transportation to and from the camp, and discussions with the parents and campers regarding any special concerns related to the camper's health form or other pertinent information. Completion of each of these steps become a strategic factor in assuring a good camping experience.

**The second phase of the experience is that which takes place at camp.** Three component parts of the Rainbow Trail camp experience which are emphasized are (1) the use of the indigenous setting (land, lakes, rivers), (2) the utilization of leadership, and (3) the study of God's word.

(1) Rainbow Trail is concerned about a program concept of camping as compared to a site-oriented camping approach. A site-oriented camp can limit program to the boundaries of the acreage on the site. In contrast, in a program concept of camping, the site become the orientation area where the fundamentals of camping are taught, for example, physical skills, group living, camp craft. The site boundaries then become doorways to adventure. The in-camp program provides campers with the skills which make it possible for them to move out to new adventures using forests, rivers, and lakes, as well as their own camp sites. In other words, the site itself does not carry as much importance as what is learned on the site... this being skills that can be taken away at the end of the week.

(2) Leadership plays a key role in all that is a part of the Christian camping experience. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is proclaimed through the Word and lived out through experience by people. The Rainbow Trail camp staff are selected, first of all, because they have shown a desire to witness for Christ before campers, and secondly on the basis of maturity and ability to work with young people in a democratic way. In short, they must exhibit a love for our Lord and Savior, and for His children. If Christ is shown to young people in a camp setting, it will be primarily through the witness of people.

(3) There is no doubt that the toughest skills for staff to learn are those which will make the Gospel attractive and relevant to today's youth. Staff training week becomes a time when hours are spent searching together for ways to witness effectively about the Good News. Bible Study is a central part of the program at Rainbow Trail. Yet it becomes necessary to help the staff learn how to not only present an effective study and discussion session, but how to also interject Christian witness throughout the day. It may be that one statement of Christian witness made by a counselor during a volleyball game could have more meaning for a camper than a whole week of study. It is therefore imperative that staff understand how important it is to bear witness in natural settings throughout the day, making Christian living a part of the total camp experience.

**The third phase of the Rainbow Trail experience centers around what happens to campers when they return to their local parish community.** There are a number of ways that the camp experience logically relates to the back-home situation. We are convinced that

camping can have enormous impact, both on the individual campers and on the home congregation, if camping is viewed as a part of the total church program. Pastors are encouraged to follow-up on the camp experience by a visit with campers as well as parents when the camper returns to the home community. When our pastors and church workers show an active interest in encouraging campers to continue practicing that which was learned at camp, a healthy relationship between parish and camp is established.

## **Meeting Objectives of Campers, Parents, Congregations and Pastors, and Staff**

As we have developed the program for Rainbow Trail, we have taken into consideration four different groups of people; the campers, the campers' parents, the parish and the pastor, and the camp staff. Each of these groups have objectives which must be recognized if Rainbow Trail is to carry out its mission and responsibilities.

**Campers:** Campers come to camp to have fun. In many cases, this is a primary objective. Thus we provide a wide variety of activities and experiences, everything from arts and crafts to white water rafting, all offered under competent leadership. We need to provide opportunity for campers to find success while participating in fun, safe activities.

Campers are also interested in making new friends or strengthening existing friendships. This is achieved through the act of planning and carrying out new adventures together. We recognize that some impulsively planned undertakings are vital for youth. We realize, however, that these activities need supervision. At Rainbow Trail, counselors must have the confidence of the campers and also the flexibility to enter into the plan of the moment. None of the excitement is lost from a spontaneous hike through the woods when there is supervision. Organized parties with games and special refreshments can take the place of secret raids on the kitchen.

A third and very important concern of the camper is to have good food at camp. The food at Rainbow Trail is wholesome, tasty, and there's lots of it.

Campers want a fourth objective... a sense of freedom within the camp community. They want to feel they are having a share in making decisions, in planning programs, and in the discipline of camp living. We feel that Rainbow Trail can be one place where young people can have unlimited possibilities of being recognized for their leadership in all areas of living.

Proper consideration of our campers' objectives clears many roadblocks which separate campers from seeing the fullness of Christ within the camp community. Many campers come to camp with a deep spiritual hunger. In the fresh climate of camp, we want them to see a community of Christians living together. We want them exposed to Christian leadership at its vital best. We want them to hear again of Christ and His claim on their young lives. The Master meets them through many different experiences at camp.

**Parents:** Campers are sent to camp by the second group of people involved: parents. Our parents have told us that they expect all levels of the camp operation to exceed the standard. They desire high standards of conduct, orderliness, Christian discipline, and supervision. They expect good food, enough sleep, time for relaxation, and a wide range of activities. Parents expect forgiveness, understanding, compassion, and companionship from a mature and concerned counseling staff. Parents know their children do wrong, that they are not perfect, and that they make mistakes, but they expect others to treat them with care.

Parents recognize that a wise counselor can help a boy or girl face his or her life more honestly. Parents want their children to realize that while nature may reflect God, it is only an imperfect image. There is danger in thinking of nature as good and pure in itself... there are unavoidable natural hazards involved in living that require simple courage. The camp staff can perform a most important function in showing that in the final analysis, living requires faith that our God knows what is essential for each of us.

Parents ordinarily do not take time to spell out all of the aforementioned criteria. However, most parents who send their children to Rainbow Trail do so for the underlying reason that Rainbow Trail is a Christian camp. They hope for desirable changes in attitudes and behavior, and indications of spiritual growth. If, as a camp staff, we fail to recognize parental objectives, the parent's answer is very simple--the parents do not send their children back.

**The local parish and Pastors:** Congregations as a whole have many similar reasons for being a part of the camp community. The parish and its pastor make a continuous investment of time and money and leadership to make this Rainbow Trail experience possible. The parents must realize that all of the youngsters who attend camp will not grow at the same rate or to the same degree. They do recognize that one camp session does not repair the damage done to a child over a long previous period. Congregations do, however, have a purpose in sending their youth to camp... that they will "grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."

The parish acknowledges the spiritual hunger of youth and receptiveness to change which sometimes seems inherent in the camp climate. Recognizing the potential of this combination and knowing the freedom possible to the Christian, they have invested much money, backed by many hours of planning and thoughtful prayer, to make Rainbow Trail available to their youth. They cherish this experience for their youngsters.

**Camp Staff:** The camp staff come to Rainbow Trail for many and varied reasons of their own. Certainly they desire the fun of living out of doors as well as the fellowship of the camp community. They must never forget that first of all, camp is a closed community where things happen to youngsters because of concern. They must be challenged with a genuine love for people and a desire to help each camper grow toward spiritual maturity and more complete commitment to Christ as he or she goes from the "laboratory" back to the community. Camp staff have the responsibility of coordinating the objectives of the church, the parents, and the campers.

Staff also have the responsibility for recognizing needs in the campers, and for being sensitive and alert to remarks, attitudes and ideas or desires which might indicate a "teachable" or rather "touchable" moment. These are moments throughout the day in which an alert counselor can transfer ideas or lessons learned earlier into practical Christian life.

Rainbow Trail recognizes that some of the objectives, such as living in the out-of-doors, will be met automatically just by a camper's presence at camp. Other objectives will be met accidentally since friendships develop and campers mature at times for no apparent reason. However, long-lasting spiritual growth and a confrontation with a living Christ which is a desire permeating the objectives of all, must be achieved through planning and prayer and the recognition of the objectives of all of the groups involved.

## The Village System

A week is not a long time to develop a relationship with anyone much less children. We feel that it is critical that we give our staff the best opportunity to get to know their campers and develop trusting relationships in the shortest period of time. Therefore, our summer staff spends about 22-23 hours a day with their campers, sleeping in the cabin with them, eating, playing games and doing other activities, Bible Study, being available during free time, and cabin devotions just before bedtime. By providing the opportunity of campers to spend this much time with their counselor, hopefully walls will drop as trust levels grow. Our staff is then in a position not only to be a listening ear for campers but also to be an excellent role model of the Christian lifestyle. This puts an enormous responsibility on our summer staff. That is why so much time and effort is put into the hiring process.

At Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp, we use the Village System as our program style. Briefly, the Village System is a style of program which focuses attention on small group interaction and camper involvement. The camp is broken down into five groups, or villages each consisting of 2 or 3 counselor groups, (ideally 21 campers and 3 counselors.) Villages function as a working group-- each possessing a village name, a cheer, and a unique identity. Members of villages are given many responsibilities for their own week. Each village is "Village of the Day" during one day of the week. During that day, the village chooses a theme for the day based on the Bible Study, and they plan and lead a morning and an evening worship experience. They are also responsible for hosting the rest of the camp in a related all-camp activity. The role of the counselor in the village is to shepherd the campers, allowing the campers to take on the leadership roles themselves, as opposed to simply being an audience for the staff.

With the cabin group serving as a building block for our style, each cabin is grouped with one or two other cabins in what we call a village. A village basically consists of 3 counselors and approximately 21 campers. At least one of the cabins will be male. This group serves as the planning level of our program. Instead of the program director assigning times for activities for each camper, each village will develop their own plans for each day. The camp director has set some parameters in which this planning happens. Our three meals will happen at set times, there will be a morning worship and an evening worship/campfire, Bible Study will occur sometime during the day, and there will be an all-camp activity either in the late afternoon or early evening. There is also an event called Round-up each day. Round-up is a time where the camp community gathers together, and each village is responsible for presenting a skit or a poem, or in some other way, creatively expressing what their group discussed in Bible Study that day. Round-up serves several purposes. It offers campers a chance to be up front... sharing their talents and gifts with the rest of the camp. It also serves as feedback to the staff. By watching a Round-up presentation, a counselor can tell if his or her campers grasped what was being taught. Within these parameters, there is still a great amount of time for each village of campers to plan their activities for the day. We have intentionally mixed male and female in villages; males and females like to do different things. This will allow some of the give and take, being aware of others needs, and cooperation that we hope will be present in the Christian community. A camper representative from each village will attend staff meeting each morning to share their village's plans. Even at this meeting, the representatives may have to make some adjustments in their schedule to allow other villages to accomplish their plans too. In addition to planning their activities each day, one day of the week, each village will have the responsibility of planning the Village of the Day events, mentioned earlier. Each village will also have the responsibility each week for having one day of KP and one day of Shower house Duty. These responsibilities are not assigned as punishments, but rather, are opportunities for every member of the camping community to serve the rest of the campers in a tangible way. Each village also completes a camp improvement project of their choice during their week at camp. Campers leave the campsite better than they found it, and they offer a lasting contribution for campers who will follow.

This sets the framework within which the campers will operate. Timing of all these activities is planned and executed by the campers through their own Village planning sessions. This gives a great deal of freedom of choice and planning on the part of the camper.

This style of program immerses campers in the program and allows them to begin to take some ownership in the program. Campers can attend multiple weeks because with each new group of campers comes a completely new week. Campers begin to understand not only what it feels like to lead worship, but what it means to worship. The program provides many opportunities for campers to gain leadership skills that can easily be applied to their life away from camp and in their congregation. We are preparing the future leadership of our church in a very real way!

The Village System requires a different style of counselor than most camps use. Because the campers are the central focus of our mission, the counselors will lead more from the side and

from behind as idea people, encouragers, supporters, coordinators, shepherds ensuring that everyone participates, and sharing their talents with and through their campers. The staff must feel very comfortable with who they are and their gifts and talents, because with this style, the campers will be the up front people, not the counselors. The staff will have to find their personal gratification through the success of their campers.

## **Role of Camp Pastors**

The Pastor who comes to camp is assigned to one of the villages, either one with his or her own youth, or another. This choice is left up to the pastor. Village pastors are assigned to operate in two distinct but overlapping areas:

1. Pastors are resource persons in the Bible Study sessions. They are not there to provide all the answers, but rather, to be sensitive to the needs of the group as they struggle together over a theological question, a passage of scripture, or church doctrine as the campers try to apply it to the here and now of the campers' lives.
2. Pastors serve as shepherds in the truest sense of the word. They function as grown-up campers, lending mature thinking to the planning of the village. They engage in the activities planned by the campers as one of them. They contribute to the work, play, worship and study segments of the camp week. Most of all, they are available to talk, discuss, counsel, love, understand, and feel the struggle of life with the youth. They are free to be pastors, since they are relieved of all administrative and disciplinary responsibilities.

## **Progression through Successive Summers**

Rainbow Trail is concerned about keeping campers through successive summers. We are interested in bringing a young person back to camp again so another facet of his or her life can be illuminated by experiences designed to help him or her mature. The concept of progression within the camp program is necessary. Young people with all their other interests don't wish to return to camp for more than a year or two if they continue to repeat the same experiences.

Our hope is that skills learned at Rainbow Trail will be those which have continuing value. We want campers to continue to explore the Bible in a meaningful way as they seek God's will for their lives. Family camping also will become a part of their way of life as they continue to know and use the out-of-doors. Skills in campcraft, cooking, rafting, archery, and backpacking are built-in features of the Rainbow Trail type of camping, and certainly have great carry-over value.

## **In Conclusion**

The possibilities of Christian witness are outstanding at Rainbow Trail. We must make the best possible use of our land and lakes, our program, and our leadership as we talk with our campers about Jesus Christ. It is good to stop and realize that Jesus carried out a great deal of His ministry in small groups in the out-of-doors, recognizing the individual worth and desire of each person with whom he visited. We might give more thought to using some of his methods. He gave most of His great lessons while walking country roads - "Consider the lilies of the fields, how they

grow. Yet your heavenly Father . . .” He sat upon the hillside and spoke the Beatitudes. He knew and loved the wind and the waves. He enjoyed sleeping out overnight. He went on numerous “cook-outs” with His disciples. In fact, He visited with his disciples over a beach breakfast of fried fish after His resurrection. Certainly, He made very effective use of the out-of-doors. Perhaps we can again learn something from this. However, He never forgot His message. And neither can we as we use of facilities, skills, and abilities to translate our “acts” into an effective witness for Christ at Rainbow Tail Lutheran Camp.

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