

On going to camp

From the Rt. Rev. David Reed, The Church News, July/Aug 2007

In June, I went to Camp Capers, serving as one of the chaplains for Senior High Camp. Now 50, I've "gone to camp" for 35 years, except for a few summers when our children were little. Since being ordained, I've solemnly told family and friends that "it's work" to go to camp, sighing as I contemplate the burden of it all. And it is work. And, of course, it's also play—like worship is when we're worshipping well.

The clergy who enjoy going to camp time and again know that doing camp is hard, demanding, tiring work. They also know it's incredibly fun and deeply rewarding. And it's a chance to be part of that basic stripped-down ministry most of us ordained types love to do, uncluttered by all the important, but still secondary, complications of parish ministry. It's ministry close to the ground, side by side and face to face.

Over the years, much has changed at Camp Capers. Get me started, and I can end up in full-blown geezerhood, causing counselors' eyes to glaze over as I tell golden-hued camp stories of yesteryear. Much has changed, but much more remains sweetly and powerfully the same, and I am so thankful that my two children and about 1,000 more children of our diocese get to "go to Capers" this summer and discover (or rediscover) all that those three words signify.

For teen-aged campers in particular (though I think younger campers experience this, too), going to Capers means freedom. For years, I've heard campers and counselors (and clergy!) talk about "how free" they feel at camp. This summer, it occurred to me that, in some ways, that's an odd comment because camp life is more ordered and structured than life away from camp. Like school, there's a bell, and when it rings you better start moving somewhere else. And you move as a group, rarely alone, and if you're inclined to wander, you can bet a counselor will be inclined to come find you. You don't get to choose your wake-up time in the morning, what time you eat, what your meals are, or who shares your cabin for six nights. Going to chapel is not an option—and you worship twice a day. Plus, you get the equivalent of about a year of Sunday School. Nobody asks if you feel like going, either. Also, camp is virtually unplugged: no cell phones, no television, no laptops, no headphones or earbuds (though some soft-hearted counselors allow iPod use during rest period).

Freedom? Ask some random teenagers if that sounds like freedom and they'll probably just roll their eyes loudly. Unless they've been there. And if they've been there, and seen life enlarged in that setting, then they'll know what you mean.

I think the experience of freedom comes from at least three sources that converge at camp. The first is freedom from the expectations and constraints (for better and for worse) laid on us by those who know us well in our "regular life." Parents, teachers, coaches, friends (never mind the media and marketing people) all expect we will do, think and respond in certain ways, often based on their experience of us, sometimes based on what they want from us. At camp, you're pretty much free, not just to "be who you are" (that's often confusing for young people trying to figure that out) but to discover who you are *in relationship with God in an explicitly Christ-centered community*. Campers are encouraged to try new things, do things differently, "try on" other aspects of personhood. Thought of as selfish and uncaring back home? You can be

compassionate. A jock at school? You can lead prayers. Don't like to break a sweat? Run for all you're worth during Capture the Flag.

To find yourself accepted and valued for no other reason than you *are* is to truly find your self. It's freeing. I told the parents at Sr. High Camp's closing Eucharist that, as the Dad of two teens, I'm so glad there's a place like Capers where my children can be delighted in and reminded of how precious they are in the eyes of God, because sometimes, when you live with them, that can be hard to remember. At Capers, campers are free from the many, many voices that tell them they are something less than beloved children of God. They do not have to prove themselves; it is sanctuary.

A second source of freedom is the very structure and order that govern camp life. Boundaries are clear and expectations for behavior are high. Within the structure, you're more likely to find creativity and flexibility than group-think and rigidity. Our boundaries and expectations are identified with our call to follow Jesus and to love one another and to build up the Body of Christ. Within the order of camp life, there's more freedom (and more rowdy, graceful chaos) than we could ever use up.

Finally, freedom is found in the common life and work of each session, where each camper is valued as a member of a cabin, and each cabin as a part of the camp community. Each person's importance within the community is underscored by, typically, not starting worship or teaching until everyone is present. The "work" we're given to do at camp (from goofy games to KP in the dining hall to swimming and singing) binds us together in common cause for the common good, lifting us out of our tendency to be overly preoccupied with ourselves.

Now, you might think I've got a sermon in here somewhere, and I think you may be right. "For freedom Christ has set us free," St. Paul writes to the Galatians. In light of the freedom I've described at Camp Capers, consider what it is your church invites people into when it invites people to become part of it. Jesus Christ offers us true freedom: the freedom that comes when we know ourselves to be accepted and loved as we are, and yet continually encouraged to become more than we are; the freedom that comes within structures that are life-giving and chiefly concerned with the vitality of the community and individuals in relation to it; and the freedom that comes when we give ourselves to a common mission.

Imagine the difference for Jesus a little church camp in the Hill Country can make when it practices this. Imagine the difference churches scattered around our diocese can make when they practice this.