

***Is it too late
for United Methodist Camps
to save the United Methodist Church?***



No single ministry determines the future of the Church, but the way the Church listens to its formative ministries often reveals the future it is preparing to inhabit.

Bishops are asked to carry many anxieties at once: declining numbers, shrinking resources, competing urgencies, and decisions that will echo long after any one appointment ends.

This reflection is offered with deep respect for that burden. It does not presume error or negligence. It simply asks whether some of the conclusions we have come to—especially about camp ministry—deserve a second, more spacious hearing. It offers invitation without proposing solutions or defending existing structures, trusting that careful attention may reveal capacities still present but easily missed.

The Assumptions We No Longer Question

To engage that invitation faithfully requires naming some assumptions that now shape how camp ministry is perceived and evaluated.

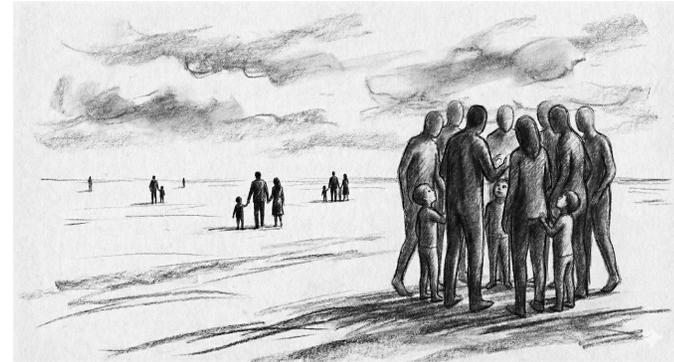
The title question is intentionally disproportionate. No single ministry determines the fate of an institution this large—but the way the Church listens to formative ministries often reveals far more about its future capacity than the decisions themselves.

Across the Church, certain assumptions operate so quietly that they are rarely named. Decline is expected. Risk is treated as something to be minimized. Financial stability is often used as the primary measure of faithfulness. The local congregation is assumed to be the central—and sometimes only—unit of ministry.

None of these assumptions emerged through negligence or bad faith. They arose gradually, in response to real pressures and real losses. Yet when left unexamined, they shape decisions in ways that feel inevitable rather than chosen.

What Camp Ministry Actually Does (When Resourced)

United Methodist camps function differently from most congregational programs. They concentrate time, relationships, and spiritual practice in ways that create unusual relational density—often drawing people who would not even consider congregational life into meaningful participation.



Children, youth, young adults, older adults, clergy, and laity encounter one another not as programmatic categories, but as a shared community. This is not incidental—it is intentionally enacted.

Because these environments compress time and intensify relationship, formation that might otherwise take years unfolds over days. Practices are shared rather than segmented. Faith is embodied rather than scheduled.

Camps do not replace congregational life; they embody and intensify its formative commitments through immersion.

When Scarcity Becomes Policy

Most conference-level decisions about camps are framed as prudent responses to the constraints of declining participation, aging infrastructure, rising insurance costs, and limited reserves. In context, this caution feels not only reasonable, but faithful.



Over time, however, caution hardens into posture. What begins as a response to scarcity becomes a governing assumption. Decisions are no longer made in light of limited resources; they are made as if limitation were permanent and determinative.

When camps are evaluated primarily through cost containment¹, utilization metrics², and risk exposure³, other forms of value recede from view. Formation that unfolds over decades, vocation that emerges unpredictably, and connectional identity that is formed *across* congregations are difficult to represent on paper.

Under these conditions, under-investment is easily justified... maintenance is deferred, and staffing is minimized, and program scope narrows, and...participation responds accordingly.

Scarcity, once assumed, becomes policy.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Once scarcity becomes the governing assumption, outcomes begin to narrow long before any formal decision is made. This is not because leaders intend decline, but because the system quietly rearranges what is thinkable.

Camps described as financially fragile are treated cautiously. Caution leads to constrained staffing, reduced program scope, and delayed investment. Those constraints predictably affect participation, visibility, and perceived relevance.

In this cycle, decline is not merely observed; it is produced. The Church does not decide to diminish camp ministry in a single moment—it does so incrementally. The self-fulfilling prophecy does not simply affect camp ministry; it trains the Church to expect less of itself.

What Is Being Decided Right Now

Decisions about camps are never only about property or budgets. They are decisions about formation, risk, and time horizon. Choices made in the present quietly determine which futures remain possible.

Each action taken in response to a constraint narrows or preserves options, often long before outcomes are visible. What appears prudent in the short term can quietly foreclose capacity in the long run.

Delay is not neutral.

What is being decided is not simply the opening or closing of particular camps. What is actually being decided is the future capacity of the Church—to form connectional identity, cultivate vocation, and compress formation across generations—or whether those capacities will be allowed to erode through incremental restraint.

A Different Question Worth Asking

Most conversations about camp ministry eventually converge on a familiar question: *Can we afford this?* It is a reasonable question, but it is also a narrowing question. When it becomes primary, it quietly limits the range of answers the Church is able to hear and the futures it is able to imagine.

There is another question, less comfortable but more determinative, that deserves equal attention: *What formative capacities are we allowing to erode, and can they be rebuilt once they are lost?* This question does not dismiss concerns about cost or risk. It reframes them. It shifts attention from what can be sustained in the short term to what is required for faithfulness over time.

Local congregations remain indispensable, yet many are now stretched thin by pastoral transitions, demographic change, and the persistent demands of institutional maintenance. If the Church is rightly committed to cultivating vital congregations, it must also attend to the practices and spaces through which vital Christians and leaders are formed.

In this context, camps are not ancillary, but rather one of the few places where the Church still practices extended, immersive formation across congregational, generational, and social boundaries.

A Note for Financial Stewards

Faithful stewardship necessarily includes financial discipline, legal responsibility, and prudent risk management. These disciplines are essential to the life of the Church, and they carry real moral weight. Decisions about budgets, assets, and liabilities are not abstract exercises; they are acts of care for the whole connection.

The legacy conditions now shaping these decisions did not originate with any single leader or moment. Declining participation, mandated fixed costs, inherited systems, and capital realities challenge stewardship at every turn.

These decisions are not carried out in spreadsheets, but by humans—professional staff, volunteers, and governing boards—who translate constraint into lived reality. Financial choices shape not only balance sheets, but the conditions within which ministry is nourished, or quietly diminished.

Stewardship rightly attends to risk—the protection of assets, people, and institutional responsibility. However, when risk avoidance *becomes the organizing principle* for decision-making, it can unintentionally narrow the Church's imagination and constrict the very capacity the connection exists to cultivate.

There is also a quieter distortion—a reluctance to relinquish a trust placed in the Church. This caution is understandable—camp properties represent generosity, generational memories, achievement, life-altering experiences, and calls to ministry. However, when preservation itself *becomes the primary measure* of faithfulness, other forms of loss can unfold more slowly and less visibly.

This reflection does not dismiss financial realities, but embraces them within a vision of stewardship that does not manage decline; but protects and sustains formative capacity for life and growth.

A Note to Connectional Ministers

Connectional ministries occupy a distinctive space of translation that integrates the vision of the wider Church and the lived realities of local congregations, districts, and ministry contexts. Through this work, connection becomes more than a structure; it becomes an experience.

Episcopal priorities and denominational commitments do not arrive in congregations as abstractions; they arrive through relationships, timing, and trust. How those priorities are framed and coordinated often determines whether they are received as support or burden, invitation or obligation. This work requires sustained attention to relationship as a form of capacity.

Trust—earned slowly through consistency, clarity, and presence—is one of the most valuable assets the connection possesses. Where trust is strong, shared movement thrives; where trust erodes, community struggles. Connectional ministries thus steward not only programs, but the relational threads that enable the Church to move together.

Large systems tend to replace formation with standards, metrics, and activities in the hope that alignment will follow. However, Connectional ministries are uniquely positioned to resist this drift by cultivating shared imagination—discerning not only what the Church is asking, but the why and how of the common ecclesial identity.

This reflection recognizes that connectional ministers do not merely coordinate activity, but help the Church widen capacity rather than manage quiet contraction. This work is subtle, relational, and essential to the future the connection is quietly preparing to inhabit.

Kindling Questions for Discernment

Formative Capacity

Where, in our conference, is deep Christian formation actually occurring beyond weekly congregational life—and where is it thinning or absent?

Replaceability and Irreversibility

If a particular camp ministry were diminished or closed, what formative practices would truly be replaced—and which would not?

Time Horizon

How do our current decision-making timelines shape the kinds of formation we are able to sustain?

Connectional Experience

How do children, youth, and emerging adults in our conference actually experience the Church as connectional rather than congregational?

What spaces or practices help people encounter the Church as larger than their local setting—and what happens when those spaces are reduced?

Trust, Translation, and Participation

Whose voices carry lived knowledge of these formative spaces, and how are they included in discernment?

Preservation and Faithfulness

How do we distinguish preservation from faithfulness?

Discernment Forward

What story do we hope these decisions will tell ten years from now?

Closing

This reflection has not attempted to offer answers or prescribe outcomes. The decisions facing the Church regarding camp ministry are complex, contextual, and rightly entrusted to those called to lead and steward the connection in this season.

Instead, it has sought to name this moment with clarity. Decisions about camps are not merely questions of assets and budgets; they are questions of what the Church is intentionally forming—and what it may be permitting to form by default. The Church must envision its capacity for future formation now to enable faithful generations tomorrow.

The answers to these questions will vary across conferences. The Church has a long history of wisdom emerging from unexpected places—lay leaders, camp ministry staff and volunteers, elders, young adults, and those who come as guests and partners in the ministry. Often, those voices are already present, already attentive, and simply awaiting invitation.

Whatever the Church decides about its camps, it is also deciding what kind of formation it believes is necessary, what risks it is willing to bear, and what future it is preparing to inhabit.

Endnotes

¹ Cost Containment

This reflection does not argue against fiscal discipline—it asks whether cost has become the primary interpretive lens rather than one necessary consideration among several.

² Utilization Metrics

Quantitative data remains essential. The concern raised here is not the use of metrics, but their sufficiency in capturing long-term formation, vocation, and connectional outcomes.

³ Risk Exposure

All ministry entails risk. The issue is not whether risk should be managed, but whether the Church has clarity about which risks are faithful to accept.

Extending the conversation

A web-based version of this booklet is available at **formativecapacity.org**

The site includes:

- an HTML edition for continued reading
- downloadable PDFs suitable for local printing and sharing

inside, Back Cover

*For the generations who found their faith here,
and for those who will need places like this next.*