

# Enjoy nature, pray away, leave the amps at home



## Highland Views

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Columnist

I was reading a story about a couple who spent many years directing outdoor religious camps where young people were encouraged to “open their eyes to the wonders of creation.” They would bring kids outside to lie down on the grass at night to look up at the stars. A prayer was said before the kids were told it was all made by God and these natural glories were teaching them about faith.

Some of their camps were held back in the 1970s, about the same time my friends and I were going to Christian camps in the Northwest. There were great summers at Tall Timbers, Calvin Crest and Buck Creek.

I was a counselor at Island Lake (with an island on a lake in the middle of an island!). We enjoyed leading Bible studies and prayers under the trees. The woods, mountains and lakes were perfect settings, away from schools and parents, to bring these youngsters to faith. We felt blessed as missionaries for God. And we were privileged to afford these experiences. Most campers came from suburban homes like we did.

Those of us who experienced these camps enjoyed the beauty of the setting. The fresh air, trees to climb, trails to explore, lakes and rivers to swim in — it was wonderfully fun. And what camper doesn't love the nightly campfire circle with silly songs and gooey “smares”? Very memorable moments.

When I think back on these meaningful times, I wonder how much I may have missed. Did I learn anything about the land, the wildlife, species of trees or songs of the birds?

At one camp I taught rifle safety, proud to show kids how to responsibly handle a firearm. But did I teach them not to go around shooting birds or the neighbor's cat? I'm not so sure.

My brother and I were camping in the High Sierra mountains one summer and just as we got settled with our tents and campfire, loud music blasted across the tranquil lake. We couldn't believe our ears. It was live music, at an alpine lake!

We walked over to see a band of young folks with electric guitars, amps and a full drum set. An adult couple came over to explain this was a youth group from a church in the city. We let them know how inappropriate it was to make so much noise in a wild place.

Faced with two clamorous clergy (we were both ministers then), the youth leaders agreed to keep the amps low. The next day, high on a mountain ridge, we could hear the drums banging away, echoing through the canyons.

By the way, this was the Highland Lakes wilderness.

There are clearly faith-based camps operated by people who value nature, sensitive to the need to be quiet, observant listeners, with nature as a respected teacher. We could hope that youth (or people of any age) can have fun at camp



Highland Lakes. CHRIS HIGHLAND

while gaining personal insights and practical knowledge of their world at the same time.

A public school district where I used to live was planning an outdoor education week at an evangelical camp (I've been there and it's a beautiful setting in the redwoods). After administrators were notified of the camp's religious mission, they wisely changed plans.

You would think school officials would have done some research enough to read the camp website where the intention is clearly stated: thousands of campers attend each year and “many of them depart with new life in Christ.” An even wider mission is stated: “We envision celebrating over 50,000 first-time decisions for Christ in this generation!”

No one is asking this camp to change its mission. Churches (or other faith groups) can send any of their members they wish to practice their faith in the forest. It just seems honest to let everyone know the reason a camp or retreat exists.

You may not have heard of Camp Quest. This nonprofit, headquartered in Virginia, “envisions a world in which children grow up exploring, thinking for themselves, connecting with their communities, and acting to make the most of life for themselves and others.”

Their mission is remarkably clear: to provide “an educational adventure shaped by fun, friends and free thought, featuring science, natural wonder and humanist values.”

With countless faith-based camping options for people, Camp Quest is primarily for free-thinking families. Are religious kids welcome? Sure they are. They can join other curious youth who feel the excitement of discovery, exploring open trails of ideas and questions.

This sounds like a wonderful camp experience to me.

*Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at [chighland.com](http://chighland.com)*