

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

I never went to church camp as a child - or Vacation Bible School, for that matter. My parents would occasionally ask if I'd want to go to camp, and I always said no. My neighbors would ask if I wanted to go to their Vacation Bible School, and I graciously declined. (Well, maybe I wasn't as gracious as I could have been, but I always said no. And they were Presbyterians, no less.) I was happy reading books, watching TV and riding my bike. I enjoyed my summers. Other than going on our annual summer vacation, I was happy staying home.

The first time I actually went to camp was when I was working at the Croatan Presbyterian Church near New Bern, NC. I was there for a yearlong internship, which was part of the Doctor of Ministry program at that time. The presbytery's camp committee was looking for volunteers for their summer camping program. I took the letter to the session, expecting they would turn it down. I thought they would think it wouldn't be worth the hassle to be without their student pastor for a week during the summer. They thought differently. They thought it would be a wonderful educational opportunity for me. I was so flabbergasted I couldn't even protest. So off I went to camp and I had a great time, much to my surprise.

During my first pastorate in Pennsylvania, my wife and I led the Junior High Bike Camp for several years. That was fun, too. We usually rode about 150 miles during the week, and the kids would be so tired they wouldn't even try to sneak out of the cabins at night. Apparently, the regular Junior High Camp was a very different experience.

Surveys show that a large number of pastors first felt a call to ministry at summer camp. Advocates for camp will tell you that a week of summer camp provides 144 hours of Christian education compared to the 52 hours a week you get in a year's worth of Sunday School classes. Camp not only gives you an opportunity to learn about God but also to learn about nature. That's an opportunity not many kids take advantage of any more.

The Presbytery of West Virginia is fortunate to have Bluestone, where we provide 4 weeks of summer camp as well as opportunities for retreats during the rest of the year. The first week of summer camp starts this Sunday, June 11. Please pray for the staff and campers that they might have a good experience, grow in their faith, make some friends and be safe.

As we were getting ready for the summer camping season, the Child and Youth Protection Policy was being reviewed. We want to do all we can to keep our kids safe and free from bullying, shaming and harassment. That may be our number one goal at camp. Yes, we want to teach them about Jesus, but if they're not safe or if they're being made fun of, then anything we say about our Lord will seem empty, if not hypocritical.

The Bluestone Committee decided they should have a Statement of Inclusivity to guide our ministry at the camp. We want to make sure everyone is made welcome – not just the cool kids, but the nerdy kids, the overweight kids, the kids that are diabetic or that have a peanut allergy. Every child that comes to us is a child of God. Every child that comes to us is loved by Jesus. We want every child to know that.

The committee worked off of a policy that has been used at other Presbyterian camps, but they tweaked it and made it their own. I think they did good work, and I want to share it with you:

Bluestone strives to create a fully inclusive culture and environment that values equality and fosters respect for all people. We understand Christian spirituality as a shared journey from which no one should be excluded. In alignment with our values, vision and mission, Bluestone welcomes all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, as guests and as full participants in all our programs.

Youth is a time of exploration and identity formation. We aim to help campers consider what it means to live a Christian life and how God is working in them, at Bluestone and in the world. We encourage our campers to develop self-confidence, embrace their creativity, explore their surroundings and create relationships with those that may be different from them.

During childhood and adolescence, deeply held aspects of identity, like one's gender or sexual orientation, can be questioned. Children and youth's exploration of their identities and interests is a normal part of their development. That's why we believe it is essential to allow children to consider different identities in a safe and affirming environment. Bluestone embraces diversity and we welcome all children to camp and hope that through their experience, they will discover more about the person God created them to be.

The arc of scripture and the work and witness of Jesus Christ supports accepting people as they are. There are people in scripture who defy gender norms and are accepted – the eunuch who was baptized by Philip and is credited with starting the church in Ethiopia (Jesus also called for acceptance of eunuchs) and Deborah, the female judge and warrior. Just as Jesus called for the acceptance of these individuals, Bluestone welcomes all people to participate fully in our programs with this statement of inclusivity.

In addition to this statement, the Bluestone Committee also worked on a policy for transgender campers. We probably won't have a lot, but we may have some. To be honest, we may have had some that we didn't even know about in the past. Each camper will be welcomed as a child of God. They will have an opportunity to learn about the wonders of God's creation, as well as the wonders of God's love. We will do all we can to share our faith in Jesus Christ with each camper, and we will do all we can to keep each camper safe.

As I said at the May 18 presbytery meeting, sometimes Jesus leads us to places that we would rather not go. However, being faithful means trusting that Jesus will show us the right way to go and the right thing to do. We're doing our best to follow Jesus. We always have. We always will.