

# THE PHOEBE NEEDLES CENTER DIOSWVA'S MISSIONAL SUMMER CAMP

What happens when you combine a dozen college age young adults, twenty-five middle schoolers, a beautiful spot in God's creation, a bunch of activities, and a program designed to model a Christ-like community?

It opens the door through which God's mission is lived. It promotes spiritual and emotional health. It raises up the common thread that binds us all together. Dwight J. Zscheile, in his book, *The Agile Church*, describes the process this way, "When God meets us where we are, we're invited to see our lives and world through different eyes. We see that what once seemed godforsaken is where God is in fact present and at work. We see that at the heart of God's purpose is the creation and restoration of communities of justice and mercy in which all may flourish."<sup>1</sup> This randomly assembled collection of campers and staff, by virtue of living together in community, become a place where all flourish.



The amazing thing about a summer camp community is exactly what Zscheile says Sunday morning church could be, except instead of simply "rehearsing the stories", we at camp experience in real life "the stories of imperfect, doubting, unfinished humans like us being entrusted by God with seemingly impossible callings and promises – futures into which they typically stumble rather than achieve with competence and mastery. In, through, and sometimes in spite of their very humanity, God sets about restoring the world."<sup>2</sup>



**Campers leave at the end of the week making comments like,**

- \* I come to Phoebe Needles because it is the place in my life where I experience unconditional love. (Jared)
- \* Phoebe Needles does what my church says you should do. (Lexi)
- \* Serving others in Christ's name during Outreach Camp makes me feel like the Church actually matters in my world. (Steph)

"I've been to a lot of camps, but only at Phoebe Needles have I been unconditionally accepted." The amazing part of all of this is that no one, campers or staff, come to camp expecting this kind of experience. They come excited, or not so excited, about doing a bunch of activities to pass another week of their summer. What they find is, as Zscheile puts it, "... a journey of faith, meaning it is about coming to see, know, and follow God's presence, movement, and promises even when the evidence seems to the contrary."<sup>3</sup>

Essentially summer camp becomes a formation experience in Christian community – we are continually "calling people into a new way of interpreting and experiencing the world...."<sup>4</sup> The activities and program are designed to level the playing field and create a common experience from which we all participate and learn.





Campers are asked to leave behind their electronic devices when they come to camp. That is a challenge for some, and downright scary for others. It is difficult to create an environment where people can make meaningful connections with one another when they are so splintered by the constant demands of social media. Many are amazed to find out that they can survive a week without their smartphone.



#### The campers speak to this quite freely:

- \* I would never tell my parents, but it was kind of nice to have a break from the 24/7 keeping up with my friends on snap chat. (Sadie)
- \* When I get home I'm going to spend less time online. (Josh)
- \* I panicked when the staff sent my iPhone home, but camp turned out great anyway. (Mark)

What happens after a week without smartphones is as Zscheile describes, "God's mission is about forming and restoring community."<sup>5</sup> The development of a Christ-like community is what a week or more of camp at Phoebe Needles is all about. "The Bible's

ultimate vision is one of community...."<sup>6</sup> Camp is, above all else, a true community.

We set out each summer to do what Zscheile describes, "This work of conversion, which is the Spirit's work in, through, and beyond us, is the primary work facing the church in our society."<sup>7</sup>

One unique characteristic of summer camp is the use of experiential education – which simply put is doing something, and then talking about what you learned,



and how it impacts your life. The high ropes challenge course, rock climbing, caving, rappelling, the low ropes course, even going star gazing, is all about providing an experience for a

group and then finding out what they learned about themselves and about the other people in their group, and how that relates to God. The focus is on the common experience rather than on the success or perceived failure of the activity.



Zscheile speaks of how important this process is when trying to be the innovative church. "The idea of listening and learning from our neighbors through processes of trial and error is quite foreign. It requires levels of humility and courage lacking in many churches."<sup>8</sup> The process Zscheile describes is not foreign at all to the Phoebe Needles summer camp program; in fact, it is at its core.



What camp teaches all those who care to observe is that God loves you in all your imperfections, and not just when you get it “right.” Learning that in a tangible, experiential way, is transformative.

\* I have never felt this good about myself. ((Kara)

\* Never in a million years did I believe that I could have rappelled off a 150’ cliff. Now I know that I can accomplish even more. (Jeff)

The small size of the Phoebe Needles summer camp program means that we really become more of an intentional community where listening, telling our story, and peer learning in the presence of the Spirit, creates the community that changes lives.



At camp we all learn together, and from each other, in ways that strengthen self-esteem in individual members, and build up the community as a whole. As one camper put it, “I never imagined I could do what I just did [traverse a utility pole forty feet off the ground], but I know I couldn’t have done it without the support and encouragement of all my new friends.”

All of this works because the college-age camp staff live into their role as ministers (mostly unknowingly) because they relate to the culture of today’s youth. They are able to transform a camp community into a church community – although it looks nothing like a traditional church to those on the outside.



In all of the activities available at camp, in the natural beauty of God’s creation in which we are immersed, campers and staff have to reckon with the presence of God in this place. “Discerning the presence of God’s reign in the ordinary circumstances of our world is central to the renewal of imagination (metanoia) to which God calls us. This work of discernment, or attending prayerfully and wondering about what God is up to in the here and now in the power of the Spirit, is not easy for many church people today because it has not been their primary focus.”<sup>9</sup> In the Phoebe Needles summer camp programs, what Zscheile describes, absolutely is the primary focus. The power of the Spirit is made visible in many ways, at unexpected times, in the oddest activity, and through the least imagined person.

Some people wonder, how a small operation like the Phoebe Needles Center, with a often rag-tag college age staff can manage to pull off what we report happens summer after summer. Zscheile states just how it works in this place, “I have witnessed a powerful renewal of imagination and practice over nearly a decade that has emerged primarily out of learning to live into the belief that God is entrusting God’s promises and callings to unfinished, gifted, complicated, regular people.”<sup>10</sup>

Why is the Phoebe Needles Center such a rich example of the missional Church?







“The church must learn how to play if it is to embrace innovation. The posture of freedom, whimsy, spontaneity, and creativity that we inhabit when we play is vital for learning and growth.”<sup>11</sup> This is what we do, summer after summer – embrace play.

And so, at the end of summer, many staff and campers leave feeling and having had experiences that Zscheile describes as ones that, “free us to change, to grow, to learn, to fail, knowing we are held and carried by One who will not let us go.”<sup>12</sup>

Countless people make missional summer camp program possible through their labor, financial contributions, ideas, creativity, and participation. Every single component of what goes into a week if summer camp is vital to the whole community that it is created.

Imagine a donor who contributes to the scholarship fund wondering how much difference \$100 can make. That donation sets into motion a series of events that no one can imagine or predict. A camper who runs across a camp brochure, sees the cost, and just as they toss it aside notice something in our philosophy that reads, “It is our hope to make Summer Camp 2016 @ Phoebe Needles available to all teens without respect to ability to pay.” So they take a chance, and register for camp, and become a part of a community they never imagined could be. A seed gets planted that we rarely see come to fruition, a life is transformed, and God’s mission carries forward.

#### Notes:

1 The Agile Church, Dwight J. Zscheile, page 35

2 Ibid, page 36

3 Ibid, page 45

4 Ibid, page 45

5 Ibid, page 53

6 Ibid, page 54

7 Ibid, page 57

8 Ibid, page 67

9 Ibid, page 77

10 Ibid, page 78

11 Ibid, page 89

12 Ibid, page 148



*The Reverend John H. Heck is the Executive of the Phoebe Needles Center, Inc., the camp and conference center of the Episcopal Diocese of Southwestern Virginia.*