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## Summer camps face great loss in wake of COVID-19 pandemic

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Thursday, April 09, 2020 (18 days ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- Thousands of students each summer attend camps held at Baptist conference centers across the U.S.

But in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, event leaders are facing difficult decisions. Because the landscape of the pandemic is constantly changing, many camp leaders are still undecided about this summer's events.

Hance Dilbeck, executive director-treasurer of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, said leaders there hope to make a decision about their summer camps -- most held at Falls Creek Conference Center -- by the end of this month.

"We want to wait as long as we can to make sure we have current data," Dilbeck explained. "We're working with our health department and government officials. We'll be safe and responsible. We're praying that God would allow us to have camp -- at least a partial camp, because it's so important to us."

Nathan Lorick, executive director of Colorado Baptist General Convention, said his team is still waiting to make a final decision because of how vital camps are to the spiritual health of students who attend.

"It's not about numbers," Lorick said. "It's really about those kids who are going to go and encounter the Gospel of Jesus Christ and who are going to be called out to ministry."

Lorick said the greatest tragedy would be for those students not to have the opportunity to experience the Gospel.

Kevin Perrigan, camp manager of Carson Springs Baptist Conference Center in Newport, Tenn., said the primary factor influencing any decision to close the camps is the safety of the campers.

"The emerging situation and the potential risks to our campers are the primary factors in determining how we'll proceed in the future," Perrigan said. "As of now, we have not made sweeping decisions about cancellations for the summer. We are quite literally monitoring the situation on a daily basis and making decisions based on the most reliable information available and with the health and welfare -- both physical and spiritual -- of those who come to camps in mind."

Brian Hobbs, communication director for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, also said the No. 1 priority is the well-being and safety of guests and campers. Leaders at Falls Creek Conference Center, which hosts camps and events for thousands of Oklahoma Baptists each year, are carefully weighing all the best information available and remain hopeful that the summer ministry will be able to continue, if only partially.

Dilbeck said ministry will continue regardless.

"We are confident that God is more than able to lead and guide us to ministry with or without those weeks of summer camp," he said.

Russell Klinner, executive director of Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center in Alabama, said one of the hardest parts of the current situation is seeing the camp's grounds empty.

"We have 800 acres, and it's a beautiful setting," Klinner said. "The azaleas are blooming, and the dogwoods are covered up, and our grass is perfect, and nobody's enjoying it except me and our staff. It's eerie. It's this weird, serene feeling to walk campus. And usually right now we'd be covered up with guests in the springtime and hosting lots of events on the weekends."

Perrigan also noted the frustration that can come with a blossoming conference center being empty at one of its peak times.



Leaders at Falls Creek Conference Center, which hosts camps and events for thousands of Oklahoma Baptists each year, are carefully weighing all the best information available and remain hopeful that the summer ministry will be able to continue, if only partially. Falls Creek photo

"They are sacred places where countless people through the decades have come to Christ, been called into ministry and simply met and spent time with God away from the dissonance of the world," Perrigan said. "We do what we do to serve churches and people, with the goal of creating irresistible places for unprecedented transformation. We look forward to getting back to providing that ministry."

The conference centers are currently being maintained and upheld by a few essential staff and groundskeepers, in hopes to have them ready for events to begin again soon.

Perrigan said when churches emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, they may need a refreshing environment for a time of renewal. He hopes Carson Springs can be such a place.

"As you can imagine, maintaining large facilities like ours is a full-time job, but fortunately one that allows our employees to accomplish those needed tasks while maintaining distance," Perrigan said. "We have worked hard the past few years to improve our facilities so that those attending our two conference centers have unforgettable experiences that allow them to focus on spiritual formation and recreation."

The staff of Shocco Springs normally numbers around 170, but currently only 25 employees remain on site, including residential employees like Klinner. The camp is shut down until April 30, but Klinner expects that period to extend.

Shocco Springs is currently operating with 50 percent of its typical income and has faced approximately \$3.5 million in losses. Drawing from emergency savings has allowed operations to continue. But Klinner said it is important to recognize that not all camps and conference centers are able to cover their losses.

"A lot of camps and small conference centers are not in the same boat," Klinner said. "They're struggling to make payroll; they've laid people off. They're trying to figure out where their summer's going to be and how they're going to keep doors open."

Perrigan said it is vital right now to carefully steward resources, and to pray for leaders to make the right decisions about whether and when to hold camps.

it is vital to be stewarding resources well and praying for leaders to make the right decisions.

"We take stewardship very seriously, so we have sought God's wisdom for how best to manage our fiscal resources," Perrigan said. "Looking more into the future, we are challenging ourselves to transform our operational strategy to include programming and events that meet newly recognized needs created by this current crisis."

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