

Camp Firebird (previously known as Camp Phoenix) was put in my portfolio as Ministry Developer for Children and Youth. The aim was that I would help relaunch Camp Phoenix in a sustainable way and to create relationships and pathways between parishes, dioceses, and ministries across the Episcopal Church to serve the emerging generation of young people in our communities.

The story of Camp is important: In the summer of 2022, Camp Phoenix was halted halfway through due to flooding, a Covid outbreak, and because of Safe Church concerns. This “camp on hiatus” was given to me in the fall of 2022. For a year, I developed and worked with a Leadership Team, mostly made up of returning stakeholders in Camp Phoenix. The first Camp Phoenix returned on my watch in July 2024 at a new location, Camp Wyman, with almost 20 staff and 48 campers. This part of the story is complicated to tell: it was hard in many ways, but it needed to happen so that rebirth could also happen.

From that experience, I grew a particular kind of team, recruited a specific kind of gifted leader, and hired an extremely talented administrator - Katrina Moore. We kept what worked and changed what didn't. We set strong boundaries and kept them and communicated exactly what we hoped for and expected in terms of staff behavior, camper participation, and what we thought God might do with the space we were giving God. We had 20 staff members and almost 60 campers. Gladly, Katrina Moore has agreed to be my co-director for Camp moving forward.

And all I can say is that all of it worked.

Who is Camp Firebird reaching?

One camper who has never been to church, is homeschooled, and has always wanted to go to summer camp.

A counselor who was mistreated by another counselor last year - but came back to have a redemptive experience.

Kids who have a parent with cancer.

Several campers from FCCI who bravely experienced camp as a deep dive into American culture.

Kids who are the only kid at their parish church.

Parish clergy who gave their extra time and energy to this project.

A handful of cabin counselors and leadership team are folks who are in discernment for ordained ministry.

Friends of campers who were especially invited to come.

Kids who live in households who often don't have enough to eat.

Teenagers who need to work on the weekends and evenings to give money back to their families.

Kids who said after camp - I have never felt the love of God so near to me / I know what it's like to desire to worship God.

Campers who live on the margins of church life, if they attend church at all.

Over half of campers required financial assistance to come to camp.

Around 1/3 of campers took daily medications.

Many campers who live with autism, neurodivergence and/or mental health struggles.

Many campers who identify as LGBTQIA+.

How do we keep building Camp Firebird so that it continues to be a ministry for some of our most overlooked folks in the church - children and youth? The research shows that camp only "works" when done in partnership with the local parish church. We need more and greater buy in from our parishes! We also need to build up our scholarship fund, especially in this political and economic climate where many families struggle to make ends meet. In 2025, we gave away more than \$8,000 in scholarships for camp. From the parish to the diocesan level, camp (and other children and youth formational ministries) need to be taken incredibly seriously by means of financial support, prayer support, communications and by listening to the experiences of our young people regularly, like it's a faith practice of our own.

I have three thoughts about the overlap of Camp ministry with Diocesan ministry as a whole: 1.) Culture change takes a long time, but it is happening. Cultural change on a diocesan level is going to take a long time. Camp's changes are a baby step, and significant! But let's not imagine that now that camp is up and running again, that our spiritual formation for "the least of these" is a box we can check off. 2. ) The future of children and youth ministry and formation is intergenerational ministry in the church. The research, the theology and my intuition says this. Camp models this kind of ministry; parishes are welcome to join in and follow suit. 3. When this ministry is siloed, it cannot grow. There is still a lingering belief that there is a magic "youth and children" button that, when pushed, they will appear! This is a dangerous myth. Growing our church "younger" is an all-hands-on-deck, urgent, and crucial situation. Across the diocese, we are still fighting to see youth participate, be welcomed, and be listened to on every level.

Camp Firebird is a time in the Diocesan's calendar when we practice these principles and hopes in full color. However, if we land all of our diocesan hopes for children and youth onto camp alone, our parishes will suffer. Camp is as successful as our partnering parishes. And our Diocese is as successful in this ministry as the parishes are.

Let us pray for many future decades of faith development and care for young people here in our Diocese, through camp, through small weekly gatherings in our parishes, and through the

intentional and necessary participation of children and youth at every single meeting of the church at large. Let us be worried when they are not there, let us be deeply concerned when we don't hear their voices, let us mourn when we organize only for our adult communities and our grown up needs.

And let us hope and work for a near future that is far brighter than anything we've seen so far. We at Camp Firebird will follow the young ones, as they lead us to Jesus. It's a joy to serve them. Join us!