

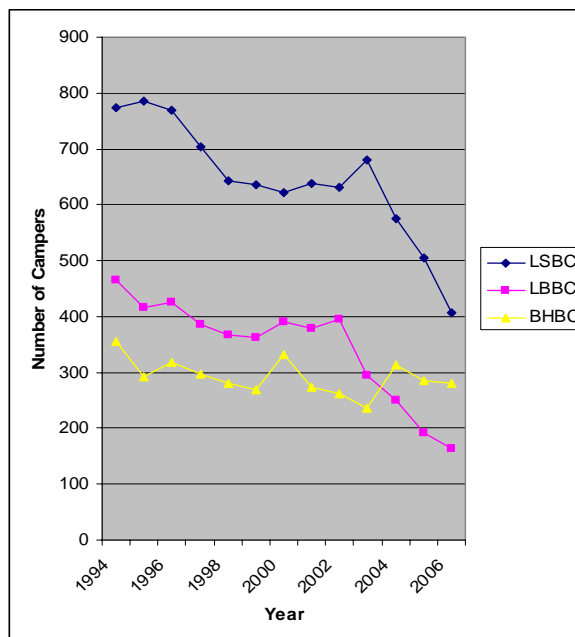
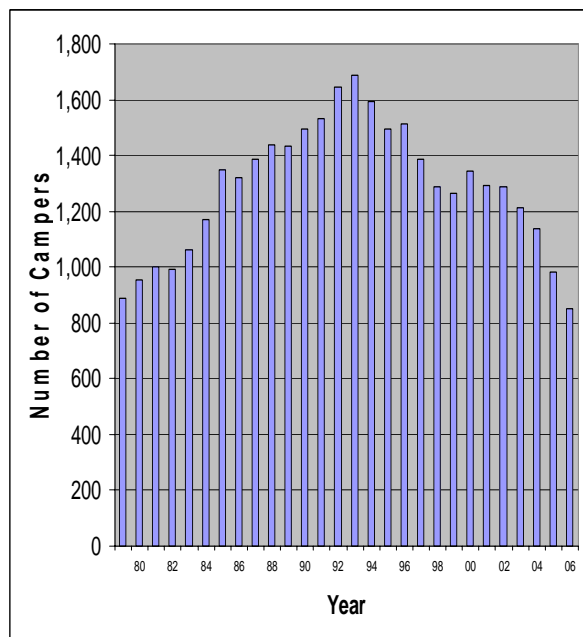
# Benton Camp Status

## Background

The specialized regional ministry of camping emerged in the 1950's (as it did in other denominations). Since then many faithful persons and churches have generously donated their time and money to support the camping program and to enhance the camping properties. Life-changing experiences during camp programs remain fond memories of many church leaders.

Times have changed, and camping has been affected just like everything else. Camping participation has been on a relentless decline for 15 years. At the same time costs and expectations have continued to rise. In 2006, camper attendance was the lowest it has been since 1978 – about half of its peak which was in 1993.

Last year, the crisis that had been building in our camping program for many years could no longer be ignored. As I reported to you, camper participation in 2005 dropped by another 17% and we ended the year with a \$60,000 shortfall in the camping program. In responding to that crisis, the Regional Ministry Board adopted a plan. The plan included: (1) Using \$30,000 from reserves to supplement the camping program in 2006 (almost all of it to Lake Benton); (2) An increase in camper fees; (3) Numerical goals for camper participation; and (4) The requirement that specific recommendations regarding camping come to the Regional Ministry Board as part of the budgeting process for 2007.



In adopting that plan, the Board said: *Unless camper participation turns around in 2006 we cannot continue the regional camping program as we have known it.* This message was communicated to pastors and churches in meetings and in writing.

Declining camper participation is not the exclusive experience of GRR camps. All across the country, traditional camping of all kinds is struggling with declining enrollment (much of which is demographic), skyrocketing costs, intensified regulation, and fierce competition. Over half the camps in the United States have experienced flat or declining attendance. Many close every year.

Camping has never been a “money-making” program for the Region. However, it has always necessary that fiscal responsibility included a neutral cash flow. Camper fees contribute only about 50% of total camping costs. About 25% of camping costs are covered by direct donations by churches and individuals. The remainder is made up by the Region, rental fees, and sales. Obviously, any decline in camper participation not only has a direct negative impact on the finances of the camping program, it also raises a larger stewardship and effectiveness question.

Last year the Board established modest camper goals of 250 for Lake Benton, 250 for Blackhawk, and 500 for Lake Springfield. Still 2006 camper attendance at Blackhawk was down 2%; at Lake Springfield it was down 19%; and at Lake Benton it was down 14%. While camper decline has impacted all the camps, in the case of Lake Benton it has become critical.

|                         | <b>2006 CAMP FACILITY USAGE</b> |                  |                            |                  |                 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
|                         | <b>TRADITIONAL</b>              |                  | <b>SPECIALTY</b>           |                  | <b>RENTAL</b>   |
|                         | <b># Camps</b>                  | <b># Campers</b> | <b># Camps</b>             | <b># Campers</b> |                 |
| <b>Blackhawk</b>        | <b>10</b>                       | <b>246</b>       | <b>7</b><br>(2 cancelled)  | <b>56</b>        | <b>\$2112</b>   |
| <b>Lake Benton</b>      | <b>9</b><br>(1 cancelled)       | <b>146</b>       | <b>8</b><br>(5 cancelled)  | <b>26</b>        | <b>\$783</b>    |
| <b>Lake Springfield</b> | <b>12</b><br>(1 cancelled)      | <b>432</b>       | <b>2</b><br>(1 cancelled)  | <b>22</b>        | <b>\$18,166</b> |
| <b>TOTALS</b>           | <b>30</b><br>(2 cancelled)      | <b>807</b>       | <b>16</b><br>(8 cancelled) | <b>104</b>       | <b>\$21,061</b> |

As the 2006 season closed, we faced even greater deficits at Lake Benton than we had anticipated (\$8000 more than the \$27,000 we anticipated and planned for). We came to the painful conclusion that full-time camp operations at Lake Benton were no longer financially viable, primarily because camper participation continues to decline at a dramatic rate. In consultation with the Vice-President for Personnel, the Manager at Lake Benton was notified that his contract would not be renewed at the end of 2006. In a difficult budget meeting, the Ministry of Financial Stewardship concluded that we could not continue the operation at Lake Benton as is.

The Budget Proposal for 2007 which came to the Regional Ministry Board in October 2006 did not include an operational budget for Lake Benton camp. I was instructed by the Board to prepare a strategy for next year.

## **The Crisis**

Why we cannot continue to operate Lake Benton as we have:

1. Camper participation has fallen to such a level that it questions effectiveness and stewardship. In 2006, 17 traditional and specialty camp opportunities were planned for Lake Benton. Six were cancelled, and four others were combined into two because of low participation. Efforts to

enhance camper participation through specialty camps have not materialized.

Twenty-seven churches sent campers to Lake Benton (seven churches also sent campers to other regional camps). The median number of campers among those churches was 2 per church. 50% of the Lake Benton campers came from five churches (Upper Alton, FBC Charleston, FBC Marissa, Pate Chapel, and Cherry Street).

Because of low camper participation, direct expenditures at Lake Benton were \$448 per camper in 2006.

2. During 2006, twenty-eight churches contributed \$21,849 to the finances of Lake Benton (including 10 churches that did not send campers). The median among those contributing churches was \$535. Over 50% of the financial contributions came from six churches (FBC Highland, FBC Murphysboro, Pate Chapel, FBC Charleston, FBC Marissa, and FBC Mt. Vernon).
3. Lake Benton has been unsuccessful in its attempts to attract rental usage as a significant supplement to its income.
4. Over the past several years, Lake Benton has accumulated \$90,534 in deficits.
5. Camper participation and finances make even a part-time camp difficult. Blackhawk, which is part-time (with a budget of \$67,086) had 302 campers, raising \$43,675 through camper fees. In contrast, Benton had a total income of only \$48,970 with only 172 campers (\$26,123 in camper fees). In other words, the total income of Lake Benton in 2006 was still \$18,000 short of meeting a part-time budget like Blackhawk's.
6. Even with no camp program, no staff, and no significant improvements to facilities, Lake Benton will cost the Region \$19,250 next year for insurance, basic utilities, and barebones maintenance (over \$50/day).

### **Actions to Date**

In consultation with the Vice-President for Personnel and the Vice-President for Finance, the manager at Lake Benton was notified in September that the employment contract would end December 31<sup>st</sup>.

The Regional Ministry Board was given a full report at its meeting in October. Pastors were given that information as part of the report following the Annual Meeting.

The Camp Advisory Council discussed the situation and prospects at its meeting in November.

The Ministerial Staff of the Region also discussed the situation and prospects at its November meeting.

The Ministry of Planning and Review discussed options at its meeting on January 19<sup>th</sup>.

Dwight and Randy met with interested pastors on January 30<sup>th</sup> in Mt. Vernon.

The property at Lake Benton has been secured and Randy McNeely is taking steps to have it cleaned and properly cared for.

At its regular meeting on 2 February 2007, the Regional Board adopted the following action: *Celebrate a half-century of Christian camping at Lake Benton with a de-commissioning service, and dispose of the property as expeditiously as possible. Proceeds that may be realized would go first to erase the accumulated deficit and debts of Lake Benton Camp. Any remainder could create a fund for scholarships, mission trips, and other programs designed for children and youth.*

It was a painful and frank discussion, which included several options. We are proceeding to implement this as soon as possible. Meanwhile, we are arranging for some resident security for the property. Please be aware that fixed costs (insurance, utilities, etc.) associated with the camp property will continue even when there is no camp program there. Our best estimate is that this will be about \$20,000 a year. We have no idea how quickly (or even “if”) we will be able to dispose of the property.

This decision by the Board will disappoint many, but it was not considered lightly. It does not signal the abandonment of children and youth ministries. As long as participation continues at a level commensurate with responsible stewardship the Region will offer and promote discipleship opportunities for youth and children. We are already making plans to expand mission trip opportunities for youth – an activity that we know has high impact on youth without the overhead expense of maintaining property.

We will also offer an additional 10% discount to Benton campers (those who have attended in the last two years) when they register for programs at either Blackhawk or Springfield. In addition, those churches in Area IV and V that provide transportation for campers to either Blackhawk or Lake Springfield may ask for a \$50 transportation grant from the Region.

Lake Benton Baptist Camp has not been unfairly targeted. The same expectations are in place for both Lake Springfield Baptist Camp and Blackhawk Baptist Camp. While Lake Springfield enrollment is higher than Lake Benton, it continues to decline at the same alarming rate. Blackhawk Baptist Camp has managed to maintain a flat enrollment at a subsistence level thanks to the extraordinary efforts of a few people. This did not happen overnight and is not limited to the GRR camping program.

For at least five years we have warned about the unsustainable pattern that was emerging in the Great Rivers Region. Over those years, numerous programs and services of the Region have been cut back or even eliminated while the camping program continued to accumulate deficits. Staff positions have been eliminated, contract services reduced, grant support of campus ministries eliminated, participation in ecumenical organizations erased, and administrative costs have been cut to the bare bone. What would have been a very difficult situation under the best of circumstances has become untenable given the financial storm in which the Region finds itself.

Even in the midst of this storm, we can have confidence despite the fact that we cannot see more than a few feet. Our confidence is in the Christ who stilled the storm. There is no assurance in “horses and chariots” (human effort and power), but only in Christ who is “the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” It is our privilege to serve Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

We covet your prayers in the midst of the storm,