

Go Outside: A Leader's Classroom

By Chad Karger

Twenty-two years ago my family vacation included a white-water rafting trip down a stretch of the Arkansas River near Buena Vista, Colorado. It tops the list of being both one of the coolest family adventures we'd taken together as well as one my life's most embarrassing moments!

Right as our boat entered one of the class three rapids, my mother was thrown from her seat on the boat and landed face-first into the stranger's lap seated across from her! The man's look on his face was one of shock and awe: was it the rapids or my mother in his lap! My dad immediately reached over, took hold of the back of her life preserver, and pulled her back in her seat. Meanwhile, as a sixteen year-old, I was cowering in the back of the boat weighing my chances of swimming instead of continuing in the boat!

Instead of being scarred for life, I was hoping to find a new adventure in the wilderness, this time on the trail. The next summer, I met up with about ten other high school guys in the mountains in and around Taos, New Mexico. With a couple of professional guides, we were led on an eight-day trek into the New Mexico backcountry. This experience brought me face-to-face with God's rugged, beautiful creation in ways I had never experienced living in a major metropolitan city. The soaring vision of God I encountered had during those eight days was matched by a more honest assessment of my dependency and need for God and others.

Little did I know the important place these two summers would serve in my spiritual development. It wasn't long after high school that I was serving in the local church as a summer intern and youth pastor. I immediately began looking for ways to incorporate wilderness-type experiences in my efforts to teach and lead. For several years I utilized that same company that led my family and me down the river all those years before, Noah's Ark in Buena Vista, Colorado. The outdoors became one of the most important classrooms for students who showed leadership potential.

I've since been part of creating an organization that utilizes these experiences to encourage and support leaders in the local church and in ministry. After eighteen years full time ministry, I am convinced that those who lead the church spend far too much time in air-conditioned, artificially lit, cubicle-planned buildings! And it shows, too!

Depression, anxiety, overall-life dissatisfaction, and job-related stress are at an all-time high among those who lead the local church or in full-time ministries. Much of the work I do now involves walking alongside of these leaders offering regular support and encouragement. Very few experiences match the intensity and illumination that being on a weeklong adventure offers. Outfitters such as Noah's Ark have been instrumental in this effort.

When Jesus was standing on the mountainside preaching one of his most famous sermons, he said something very simple that should penetrate our sophisticated, cluttered, and busy lives, "Do not worry." To which most of us would say, "Yeah, I hear you Jesus. But, you haven't seen my never-ending list!" Jesus told the audience then and says to us now, "Go outside and look at how God feeds the birds and clothes the flowers. How much more so will he take care of your needs? Don't worry about the stuff of this earth; isn't your life more than what you eat or what you will wear, or what your working yourself to death for?" Isn't the life God has given to you more than the church growth, budgets, buildings, and going from good to great?

Yes! Yes it is! How will you know that if you don't take Jesus at his word?

Go outside and leave behind the cramped spaces of small perspectives. Go outside of the worries that rob you of the life God has given to you in Christ Jesus. See His powerful and abundant presence in the balance of nature, in the beauty and austerity of the backcountry.

The members of the church, starting with her leaders, must plan for times of learning, reflection, and rejuvenation that occur outdoors. What if pastors, elders, and leadership teams at local churches allocated a portion of budgeted monies for education and conferences for learning experiences that were Biblically based in a wilderness setting? Imagine members of a community of faith whitewater rafting all day long, carving through dramatic canyons and maneuvering through class three rapids. Imagine this a leadership team pushing their bodies, minds, and spirits together through the thin air of an alpine meadow, in awe of the beauty and the rugged terrain.

While conferences with whiteboards, in lecture halls, and helpful notebooks are here to stay for church leaders, learning experiences such as these would usher these leaders into a holistic challenge that more conventional settings lack. This goes for members of these churches, too. There are cruises, Holy Land Tours, and resort-based conferences that all serve good purposes. But, I have come to believe that the children of God need to spend more time in settings that put them in more direct contact with God's natural care and provision.

First, *an experience in the wilderness, whether it is a multi-day hike or an all-day rafting trip, is a physical experience.* This setting gets our bodies into the process of learning. We retain more when we are more engaged in the learning. Moreover, it is good to be taken out of an otherwise sedentary lifestyle that pastors and leaders often lead and into a setting that requires us to use the bodies that God has given to us.

Secondly, *whenever we push our bodies beyond their normal comfort zones, the mental and emotional test that results has a cleansing effect in our minds.* It has been proven time and again that exercise is an effective antidote to anxiety. A well-planned trip into the wilderness with helpful content to focus participants brings people face-to-face with their limitations but also the beauty of God's creation. This is a very powerful combination and leads to the most important aspect of a trip like this.

Thirdly, *we are reminded of our right place!* In the wilderness we come into direct contact with a very powerful display of God's creation. The Apostle Paul said that God's "eternal power and divine nature" in creation. The Spirit uses this display to teach us that we are absolutely dependent upon God as creator and redeemer. Members of Christ's Body must come to terms with God's Lordship over every aspect of our life.

Go outside!

Walk out the front door and enter the rugged, wild, and pristine world of God's creation. There, what you see will remind you of the rest and peace you have in God.