

Hello! I'm Terry Covington, Executive Director at Merriwood Christian Camp. Today, I want to share my heart with you.

The mission of Merriwood is to help campers find and pursue life in Jesus Christ. We've been doing that through summer camp ministry (along with spring and fall retreats) since our founding in 1958. Our year-round team of 8 work all year to prepare the grounds, program, and hiring staff for these nine weeks of summer ministry. This year, we already have nearly 1,400 campers signed up, ranging from day camp to teen.

Like the rest of the world, our ministry came to an abrupt stop in March. Due to COVID-19, we were unable to host most of our spring retreats, preventing us from ministering to over 700 students and guests, and losing nearly \$40,000 in income. From the beginning, we have kept up on all the data, expert opinions, changing regulations, and anything that would give us an indication of how we can safely run camp this summer. It has been extremely stressful for our staff, needing to plan for the summer, but not knowing what that would look like, or even if we would be allowed to run camp at all.

Last week, two significant things happened. Our governor, Roy Cooper announced that there would be no overnight camps in **Phase 1**, and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services issued a document on regulations for Day Camps. This included restrictions like social distancing, wearing face coverings when 6 feet of distance wasn't possible, daily health screenings, no sharing of sports equipment, and no camper assemblies. As a staff, we talked through what this would look like from a practical standpoint. We sent a survey to parents to gauge how they and their children would feel about a camp that was operating with such restrictions. We were very pleased with the outpouring of support for Merriwood, and the understanding of what a difficult position we are in. Like the rest of the country, parents are very divided on their level of concern over COVID-19. Although the responses were mixed, the general consensus was that a camp where the staff and campers wear face masks most of the day, the campers are not allowed to interact with those outside their group, and boxed meals would have to be eaten outside or in a cabin would NOT be much fun for the camper. First-time campers and young children could end up with such a negative view of camp that they wouldn't ever want to come back. For older campers, they would lose the vast majority of the things they come back to Merriwood for: building relationships with their counselor, meeting new people, camp-wide competitions, skills classes that they get to choose, being challenged Spiritually in chapel services, Skit Night. If we offered camp this summer, we would have to operate under the regulations given, and that camp would bear little resemblance to the Merriwood the campers have grown to love. One thing was clear: Half-week Day Camps are not an option for most of our campers, and a camp run under the strict guidelines we have been given would not be a positive experience for the children.

With the "stay at home" order just expiring, it is impossible to tell at this time what the next four to six weeks will look like, and if any circumstances will change. We do not know if we will be legally allowed to operate overnight camps in Phase 2, or in Phase 3, or how long we will be in each phase. We don't want to make decisions too early, only to regret them later if it turns out we could have had camp. But we also can't keep our summer staff on hold indefinitely, when they could be pursuing other opportunities. For now, we have decided to cancel the first two weeks of camp, which would be the 1st Day Camp and 1st Junior Week. Even with the best circumstances, we would still be in Phase 2 for those weeks, and we have absolutely no idea what that will look like as far as health department regulations

go. If your child is registered for one of those weeks, you will receive a detailed email telling you what your next steps will be.

We are going to wait until June 1 to make a decision about the rest of the summer. With all of the planning and training that goes into making summer camp run effectively, this is the last possible date we feel we can make the decision. If there is no indication that the stringent camp regulations will lighten, we will need to cancel the rest of the camps scheduled for this summer.

If you are not comfortable with the idea of your child attending camp, even later in the summer, feel free to communicate that to us at this time, and we will process the cancellation. That will allow us to better know how many campers to expect each week and will help us in making decisions.

As I said before, this pandemic has been hard on Merriwood financially. We lost almost all our spring retreat income. Losing the first two weeks of camp could result in a loss of an additional \$90,000. If we cannot have camp at all this summer, the results could be devastating. In trying to keep camp affordable over the years, we have operated on a year-to-year basis meeting our budget, but with very little left to set aside for situations like this. Our survey indicated that, while a few Merriwood families have been deeply impacted financially, the vast majority have seen relatively little decrease in income. We are asking these families to come together and help keep Merriwood financially stable by considering making the fees you have already paid a tax-deductible contribution to help Merriwood survive these tough times.

Thank you for trusting us with your children each summer. We count it a privilege to minister to them each year. Together, we can continue to help campers find and pursue life in Jesus Christ. Soli deo Gloria! (To God alone be the glory.)