

HISTORY

Kum Ba Yah

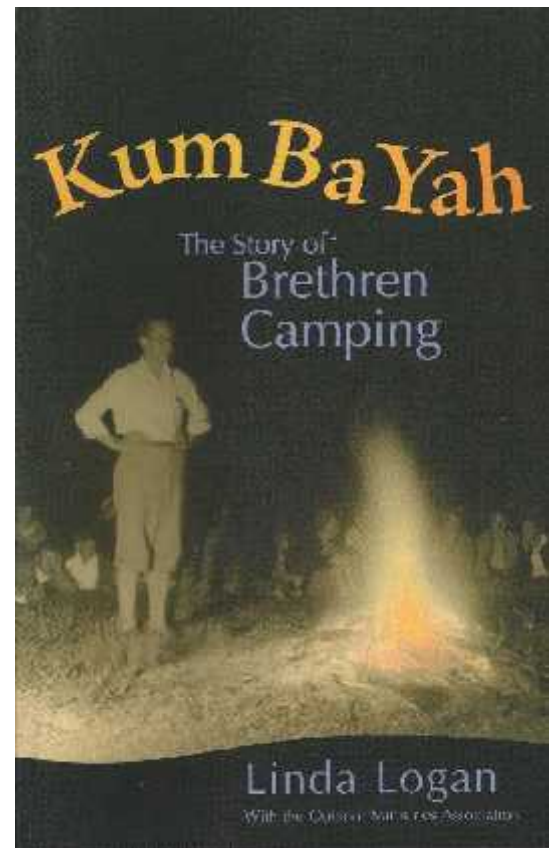
For the “complete” history of the beginnings of Brethren camping and the origin of the Outdoor Ministries Association, please refer to the book *KUM BA YAH*, written by Linda Logan with the Outdoor Ministries Association and published in 2005.

The Early Years

The Outdoor Ministries Association of the Church of the Brethren was affirmed at Annual Conference in 1977. This affirmation ended six long years of work by Walt Bowman, the first Outdoor Education Staff of the Parish Ministries Commission (PMC) of the General Board and Associate District Executive of the Southern Ohio District, and Bob Jones, Associate District Executive of the Virginia District. Several actions and situations occurred during those six years that made this organization possible. This included spearheading formative requests to the PMC through the Council of District Executives, a fortunate time of budget surpluses in the denomination, and a request that farming issues and camping be put together into a single staff position. Walt Bowman was the person selected for the camping portion of this position.

Other formative events were taking place in the camping world while these actions were being formulated and birthed. The first was a 1973 fall gathering of a group that called itself the Eastern Area Brethren Camping Committee. This event was so successful that the committee called for another meeting the next year when it gathered as the Northeastern Camp Committee and agreed to invite folks from other sections the next year. In 1975 this group that had morphed into the Eastern Church of the Brethren Camp Fellowship gathered at Camp Bethel and took on the vision of a volunteer network in camps across the denomination. Out of this event a questionnaire was developed for information that would lead to a public presence at Annual Conference.

Through the work of Bob Tully and Walt Bowman the Brethren Camps Committee (BCC) was called out to begin putting a structure together. The individuals in this first group were Arden Ball (Camp Mack), Anita Buckwalter (Camp Brethren Heights), Bob Jones (Camp Bethel), Joel Knepper (Camp Eder), Rex Miller (Camp Ithiel), and Graydon Snyder (Bethany Seminary). The BCC's first action was planning for a Consultation on Church of the Brethren Outdoor Ministries that occurred in March 1977 at the Grailville Retreat Center near Cincinnati, OH. This gathering of fifty-nine camp leaders, camp board members, Brethren leaders, educators and pastors worked through concepts and ideas presented by Walt Bowman, Eugene Roop, Bob Jones, and Graydon Snyder. Out of this event came the logo of the organization and the current structure for OMA. The BCC became the Steering Committee for the Outdoor Ministries Association.



Walt Bowman continued his work as national staff person for Outdoor Ministries until 1988. At this time budget pressures were mounting in the denomination to begin to decrease funding for some of the current ministries being supported by the denomination. Nancy Knepper was hired with a one year contract during this time of refocus for the denomination. Through pressure from several fronts the funding for this position was continued. With Nancy's leadership OMA began training events on sexual abuse, working with the National Council of Churches on the development of the "Sow the Seeds, Trust the Promise" curriculum, and the creation of the Youth Peace Travel Teams in cooperation with On Earth Peace, Youth Office, and Brethren Witness/Peace Office. It was also during this time that the recognition awards for staff and volunteers were begun.

Once again budget concern in the denomination raised its ugly head. OMA decided to work on faith and agreed to more than quadruple its budget support for Nancy's position. But this was also the beginning of the end for General Board support for the OMA staff position. The goals for the 90's signified the budget shift and Nancy's position was terminated in 1997.

The leadership of Bob Jones, Walter Bowman, and Nancy Knepper placed OMA on solid footing as it began the next leg of its journey without a paid staff person. We will be forever indebted to all of the leaders that played a role during this first 20 years of the association.

Recent History of Brethren Camping (2000-2011)

The Outdoor Ministries Association Steering Committee approached Linda Logan in the late 1990's about compiling a history of Church of the Brethren camping. Ms. Logan's 2005 book, *KUM BAH YAH*, focused on the development of Brethren camping from its beginnings in the 1920's through the end of the 20th century. The following article examines how Brethren camping has progressed during the first decade of the 21st century. In those ten years, Brethren camping and the OMA completed a difficult transition from paid national leadership to an all-volunteer force.

Ms. Logan detailed the beginning of this transition period (1997-1999) in the final few pages of her book. Without having Nancy Knepper directing the operations of OMA and its volunteers, it was necessary for OMA's Steering Committee to evaluate its activity and simplify tasks that were crucial to the Brethren camping ministry.

Two of these tasks were the OMA National Conference, held every other year, and the annual Directors & Managers Retreat. Beginning in 1997 the OMA National Conference became a tri-annual event. The 2003 OMA National Conference was held at Camp Blue Diamond in Pennsylvania. Johann Anderson, the author and compiler of the Songs and Creation music books series was the special guest. Johann shared his theories on group dynamics, management and singing. The 2006 National Conference was held at Camp Bethel in Virginia. A variety of Church of the Brethren General Office staff were the guests. Relationships and opportunities between camps and the Church of the Brethren Youth and Young Adult Ministries office, the Missions & Ministries office and the Congregational Life office, were explored. In 2009 the OMA National Conference was held at Woodland Altars in Ohio. Richard Dawson, a leader in United Methodist camping was the guest. Mr. Dawson focused on camp revitalization and the seven foundations of Christian camping.

In 2011 it was decided to discontinue the National Conference. The annual Director & Manager Retreat had evolved from 2000 to 2010 into a national style conference with speakers and activities designed to interest not only camp directors, but secondary staff and volunteers. Attendance doubled as more staff and volunteers attended the event. With this change the National Conference seemed redundant and unnecessary. In 2010 the annual Director & Manager Retreat was renamed the Annual OMA Retreat.

The OMA newsletter became a semi-annual publication in 2001 after a few years of hit-and-miss attempts in the late '90's. The newsletter, which is sent to member camps and individuals, details camping news in the Church of the Brethren, upcoming events, and camp staffing changes and needs.

For a year or two in the late '90's, OMA's annual camp and individual membership drives lagged. But beginning in 2000, concerted efforts were made to get annual membership renewal letters to camps and members. An increase in the number of member camps and their membership fees has allowed OMA to increase its budget and activities.

The Environmental Grant program has continued into the 21st century with grants given annually to a variety of Brethren camps. In 2011 an Environmental Grant program to churches was approved. As with camps, the church would need to match the grant. The maximum grant for member churches would be \$1000, \$500 for non-member churches

The Staff and Volunteers awards continue to be given annually. These special awards honor the men and women who have made long-term commitments and sacrifices to benefit the summer camp ministry programs in their districts.

Though the traditional Annual Conference Run/Walk and the national summer camp offering project it supported were discontinued in the late '90's, OMA participation at Annual Conference continued with the traditional OMA luncheon, booth and insight session.

As Rex Miller, OMA Steering Committee member during the transition period, expressed "Many changes happened as we downsized, but we were not in despair. It was still very upbeat as we faced the realities we were dealing with. We were in a time of re-visioning our purpose and efforts."

A few of the OMA responsibilities became the special ministries of volunteers, who were willing to donate their time and talents to ensure continued participation by the Brethren. Marlin Houff, Camp Administrator at Camp Swatara, joined the board of ACMNP (A Christian Ministry in the National Parks) as the denominational representative of the Church of the Brethren. This organization oversees recruitment of people to serve summers in the National Parks in ministerial roles. Jerri Heiser Wenger, Executive Co-Director at Camp Blue Diamond, oversaw OMA's vital role in sponsoring the Youth Peace Travel Team until 2009, with Steering Committee member Margo Royer Miller assuming the responsibility thereafter. This ministry team of four young people travels among Brethren camps during the summer camping season leading biblically based sessions on peace and conflict resolution. Rex Miller, Executive Director at Camp Mack, represents the Church of the Brethren on the National Council of Christian Churches Committee on Outdoor

Ministries, the group of denominations that share responsibility for creating New Earth summer camp Bible curriculum. In 2006, the Church of the Brethren provided several writers for the curriculum entitled Peace Talks.

Brethren camping, with the help of countless volunteers, staff members, and the Outdoor Ministries Association, has come a long way in the last ninety years:

- From a few locally sponsored weeks of camp for high school youth to year round district and national programming for children, youth and adults of all ages,
- From rented or privately owned wilderness sites to multi-million dollar incorporated ministries with retreat centers, winterized facilities, certified staff and accredited programs.

However, in a sense, Church of the Brethren camping really has not changed at all. It's still about:

- Helping children and youth discover God, and the world God created,
- Teaching young people how to live in peace and understanding with God, others and themselves,
- Training young men and women to be leaders in their churches, communities and the denomination,
- The three "F's" - Fun, Friendship and Faith

Brethren camping has evolved as dedicated leaders come and go, and the OMA adjusted to a changed denominational structure. Barry LeNoir, the Camp Director at Camp Bethel, summed it up well when he said, "We are focused on the future, on what we, as camps, can offer to build the denomination, and the church as a whole. Our camps are strong, vibrant ministries with thousands of faithful supporters and patrons. In the years and decades ahead, look for the Brethren camps to be leaders in the camping/conference industry as issues of peace, simplicity, environmental stewardship and Christian service come full circle."