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# GRACEFIELD

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On October 3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> 2025, the Youth in the Ottawa and Seaway Glengarry Presbyteries were invited to participate in a weekend Retreat at Gracefield Camp and Conference Center. This was the first retreat to be held in a few years. The theme of the weekend was 'Grounded'- being grounded in our faith from Philippians 4. The weekend consisted of delicious meals, games, worship sessions, and enjoying the beauty of the Gracefield campgrounds. The youth came from seven churches across both presbyteries. The sessions were led in music by Victoria and Sunjay Henry. The session talks were led by Rev. Paul Wu, Rev. Meg Patterson, Sunjay Henry and Victoria Henry. We are incredibly grateful to Gracefield for hosting our retreat and look forward to going back in October 2026.



**S: Can you begin by telling us who you are and your role at Gracefield?**

M: I'm Mark Hamilton, I serve as the Managing Director at Gracefield Christian Camp and Retreat Centre. I grew up in the Outaouais region on a farm outside of Shawville. I enjoy audiobooks, authors like N.T. Wright, Shane Claiborne, John Mark Comer, Les McKeown and Tim Keller. I'm also a big sports enthusiast and a fan of our local Ottawa Senators and the less local Seattle Seahawks of the NFL. Camp has been a huge part of my formative years and I've attended or worked at camps in Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. In my role as managing director I am on site at Gracefield Christian Camp all year round, my responsibilities include program, personnel, fund development, and marketing among other things.

**S: Can you tell our readers about how you came to faith in Christ?**

M: I grew up in a Christian home and came to faith in Jesus through the witness of my family. I grew in my faith over the years through our church's children's ministry called Cornerstone, and through my summers at Galilee Bible Camp. After high school I attended Millar College of the Bible and it was there that I first sensed that God might be calling me towards ministry. Over the years God has been faithful, even when I wasn't. One individual who influenced my journey was Joe Tenthorey who was the pastor of the church I attended in Brampton, Ontario. Joe modeled faithfulness and Christlike compassion and through his ministry God worked in my life and my faith grew to new depths. Realizing that God still had work to do in me and through me, finding a fresh perspective on my faith journey.

**S: Can you share with our readers what Gracefield is and how Gracefield came to be?**

M: Gracefield Christian Camp & Retreat Centre is a year-round Christian retreat centre located near the town of Gracefield in the upper Gatineau Valley. Our 280 acre natural environment site includes two km of shoreline on Lac Castor and over 20km of hiking and ski trails through mixed forest and rolling hills. A two km section of the Trans-Canada Trail passes through the camp. Gracefield Camp runs programs for all ages year-round. In summer we offer both day and residential camps for children, youth and families. Our summer camps and leader-in-training programs are fully accredited by the Association des Camps du Québec. In other seasons we offer a variety of programs and retreat space for churches, non-profit organizations, community and youth groups. The camp is owned and operated as a ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Synod of Québec and Eastern Ontario, and administered by the Presbytery of Ottawa. It all began in 1961 when the Billings family, who were members of St Timothy's Presbyterian Church in Ottawa, sold their summer property to the Presbyterian Synod. Gracefield Presbyterian Centre started running a summer program in 1963. Growing from a simple summer camp with facilities like the outdoor chapel (1965) and cabins (1967) into a year-round Christian retreat centre on Lac du Castor Blanc, offering summer youth camps, family rentals, and spiritual retreats emphasizing faith, nature, and Christian community today.

**S: How important is it for kids to have a Christmas camp experience?**

M: Christian camping has been a core part of my own faith journey, and I believe that it is extremely important for the youth of today to experience the beauty of creation and to have a personal relationship with the creator. Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods* says "Unlike television, nature does not steal time; it amplifies it. Nature offers healing for a child living in a destructive family or neighborhood." Christian camps create immersive, holistic experiences by integrating faith into daily life through community, nature, traditions, and leadership, moving beyond typical church settings to foster deeper connections with God, personal identity, and lifelong spiritual practices, often serving as a crucial catalyst for sustained faith and encouraging families to continue faith conversations at home. I am admittedly biased of course, but in my opinion, Christian camping is a critical element of bridging generations and developing the faith and leadership of young people.

**S: Could you tell us how you prepare for a full summer at Gracefield ?**

M: Preparation for a summer at camp starts a full year in advance, as our overnight camps are happening we are assessing and compiling feedback from campers, staff and parents. I work off and continue to develop a Managing Director's work plan document that guides my preparations and keeps the tasks in order. We have a similar document for the Program and Guest Services committee. In addition we have pre-season checklists for the senior summer staff, such as our program director, wilderness director and leadership development director. All of these things help us to prepare well.

A very brief summary: Work on tasks like the schedule and our brochures happens in the summer and early fall. In the late fall we turn our attention to budgeting for the coming summer and get our first look at the next summer's curriculum. In the new year we begin to accept camper registrations and staff applications. As the summer team takes shape work begins on the details, schedules for each week are formed and special theme days are planned. We begin to work on projects like camp t-shirts, staff training and camper birthday cards. As the senior staff arrives the final program details are put into place and the site gets prepared for our programs. We create our camper Christmas cards, and we inventory and order replenishments of items that we will need for our crafts and other programs.

**S: Is Gracefield open outside of the summer weeks?**

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Yes it is! With the brilliant colours of the autumn leaves followed by a beautiful winter wonderland, our camp offers an ideal setting for small retreats in the fall and winter. Activities such as cross-country skiing, ice skating, and snowshoeing provide a fun and exciting cold weather experience. Our experienced and knowledgeable staff will guide and support you planning your retreat, helping you to achieve your goals and objectives. Our on-site dining provides delicious and healthy meals to keep you fueled and energized throughout your stay.

**S: How would you describe Gracefield or separate it from other camps parents can send their kids? What makes Gracefield special?**

M: Why Gracefield Camp and not some other camp? Well I think that first and foremost I support parents choosing to send their kids to christian camp, even if it is not here. Having said that, I believe that Gracefield Christian Camp is a special place for a few reasons. Our wilderness program provides a safe and fun way to learn all about the outdoors and what it has to offer. Canoe tripping offers life skills and a chance for campers to test their limits on an adventure. Campers will have the opportunity to learn to paddle, camp, and live in an outdoor setting while making friends along the way. Our community is unique too, having camp facilities along with our campground and cottage rentals allows for the whole family to enjoy camp. The final thing that I will mention as a Gracefield Camp distinctive is that we are Presbyterian. We built our program in an effort to serve the Presbyterian churches of Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec.

**S: If there are kids out there who haven't been to Gracefield, can you shed some light on what they will experience during their time at camp?**

M: They can expect high-energy week of fun, games and camp activities! Canoeing, swimming, archery, campfires, cookouts and gaga ball are all part of this week of activity and learning. They will have the opportunity to experience outdoor challenges, creative activities and more. With camp counsellors and fellow campers, older campers will try out their new-found camp skills on an overnight wilderness campout at one of our wilderness sites on camp property. An exciting week of making friends, having fun and trying new things!

**S: If there are youth (12+) who are wanting to work at Gracefield, can you share what types of roles are available to them?**

M: At 14 years of age, youth are welcome to apply to enter our leadership development track. This is a two year program that begins with "The Way" for 14-15 year olds and it concludes with our LIT program. After completing LIT or at 17+ years of age we have a wide variety of roles available. Program roles such as counsellors, and lifeguards, or operations roles in housekeeping, maintenance, kitchen and guest services.

**S: What are some qualities that you look for in your potential counselors/staff at Gracefield?**

M: When hiring staff we are ultimately looking for a blend of faith with key interpersonal skills: they are loving role models (patient, kind, honest) who guide campers spiritually (devotions, prayer) while also being responsible leaders (communicators, problem-solvers, adaptable, empathetic) focused on camper well-being, safety, and the personal growth in Christ of both the campers and their own. Our goal is to find those who seek to model servant leadership like Jesus did for us.

**S: While camp is taking place, you have a chaplain who volunteers for a week at a time. Can you share how important their role is to the success of each week.**

M: Our chaplains are integral to our summer programming, they provide spiritual, emotional, and moral support to campers and staff by being a supportive presence, offering counseling, leading reflective sessions, facilitating worship, and advising on ethics, creating a safe space for all while nurturing personal growth and handling crises. They lead staff bible study, build relationships, offer a listening ear, and guide individuals through personal struggles, spiritual questions, and dilemmas, to support the whole camp community.

**S: Finally, what are some ways we can support the work that Gracefield is doing.**

M: There are lots of opportunities for getting involved with supporting Gracefield's ministries! You can help with financial support, through PAR monthly donations, online giving via Canada Helps or the Paypal giving fund, cheques or e-transfers, or through gifts of securities. You can help with your time, like our camp chaplains and first aiders, or the many who help with providing skilled and slightly less skilled labour for work projects. We also have a variety of committees and task teams that could use support from new members! Our Fund Development and Communications teams are especially in need of people to assist with a variety of projects.