



Executive Director

Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center

Carefree, Arizona

Introduction

Spirit in the Desert (SITD) Retreat Center, located in the scenic Sonoran Desert at Carefree, Arizona, is a Lutheran-rooted ministry welcoming people of all backgrounds to a place of peace, renewal, healing, and spiritual growth.

The Center is seeking a new Executive Director to lead its mission, staff, operations, financial health, donor relations, and community partnerships into a new era of expanded ministry.

Role of the Executive Director

The Executive Director manages the mission, operations, staff, donor relations, community partnerships, and guest experience at Spirit in the Desert. The Executive Director administers the financial reporting, budget preparation, and financial accountability processes orienting SITD towards financial sustainability. This role combines strategic planning with direct management, and it requires modeling servant leadership across the spectrum of hospitality, operations, ministry support, and philanthropy.

For example, in any given day the Executive Director might need to:

- Welcome retreat guests
- Address a facilities issue
- Assist with kitchen or housekeeping duties
- Collaborate with program partners
- Meet with donors

Ideal Candidate Profile

The successful Executive Director will be:

A Mission-Driven Servant-Leader

- Comfortable leading and challenging staff with integrity
- Willing to be hands-on when needed
- Consistently modeling biblical hospitality
- An Operationally Skilled and Competent Leader
- Experienced in hospitality environments like lodging, food service, facilities management, and retreat operations
- Skilled at leading cross-functional teams
- Calm and resourceful in high-pressure situations
- Effective in meeting unanticipated operational needs in real time

A Strategic and Financial Leader

- Skilled in accounting, budgeting, forecasting, and financial management
- Able to guide long-term planning and capital needs
- Able to balance immediate realities and long-term mission
- Familiarity with financial reporting, metric development, and budgeting software

A Relationship Builder

- An effective communicator, attentive listener, and steadfast advocate
- Warm, friendly, and able to connect with donors, churches, partners, and guests
- Skilled in developing donor relationships and stewardship

A Team Developer

- Knowledgeable and comfortable with the challenges of hospitality staffing
- Skilled in hiring, coaching, motivating, and holding teams accountable
- Able to boost morale and foster a team-focused culture

A Person of Character

- Emotionally intelligent
- Grounded in reality
- Resilient
- Patient
- Grace-oriented

Mission, Identity, and Values

The Executive Director is the primary steward and champion of the identity, mission and values of Spirit in the Desert. He/She must have a Christ-centered faith and the ability to demonstrate that faith with grace and integrity.

Identity:

- Lutheran Christian theology bases our mission on love of God and love of neighbor, emphasizing grace, hospitality, and spiritual openness
- We welcome guests of all backgrounds—Christian, interfaith, and those without a religious tradition—into a place of refuge, respect, and renewal

Mission:

- Spirit in the Desert embodies the love of God as a place of rest and peace where guests experience biblical hospitality, grace, and renewal of body, mind, and soul.

Values:

- Biblical Hospitality – A sincere, warm, and gracious welcome for all
- Welcoming Diversity – Providing respectful care for individuals of all traditions, backgrounds, and identities
- Spiritual Growth – Encouraging renewal, reflection, and deepening awareness of God's presence
- Fiscal Sustainability – Ensuring this ministry's future for upcoming generations

History and Campus

The property was originally developed in 1963 as the International Restaurant, a well-known landmark during the early growth of Carefree, Arizona. The campus was converted into a retreat center in 1993, when Mac and Maybelle Estrem funded its purchase and the addition of new facilities.

Today, the Center operates as an independent 501(c)(3) ministry, legally known as "The Lutheran Retreat Center at Carefree, Inc," and doing business as "Spirit in the Desert Retreat Center." The Center currently provides lodging and meals for 75 to 80 guests each day.

Campus Features:

- Spirit in the Desert occupies a hilltop site on eight acres of high Sonoran Desert. The setting and physical environment of SITD are major assets. Guests consistently describe the campus as beautiful, peaceful, and restorative.

In addition to lodging facilities, the campus offers:

- Indoor and outdoor contemplative spaces, including a maze, walking paths, and a peaceful garden
- Meeting rooms and gathering areas
- A beautiful chapel and other areas for worship and meditation
- A swimming pool and hot tub

Programs and Retreats

Spirit in the Desert provides retreats and programs for:

People in need of healing and renewal:

- Veterans
- Victims of trauma or abuse
- First responders
- Parents dealing with loss of a child or with children facing medical issues
- Individuals in recovery

Individuals seeking spiritual growth

- “Boundless Compassion” retreats
- Workshops led by respected Christian teachers and facilitators
- Leadership and management training for pastors and church administrators

Groups working to build community

- Ecumenical groups
- Interfaith organizations
- Groups that have felt unwelcome elsewhere

In this work some of our partners include the Institute for Healing of Memories, Executive Skills for Church Leaders, and Stepping Stones of Hope. SITD also offers worship services, devotional resources, and spiritual support for visitors.

Staff and Organizational Structure

Spirit in the Desert has a dedicated team of full-time, part-time, and volunteer staff.

The Executive Director is responsible for supervising and leading:

- Food Services Manager and Team
- Housekeeping Staff
- Groundskeeper
- Registration and Guest Relations Staff
- Director of Guest Services (Program and Retreat Operations)
- Director of Fundraising and Development

The Executive Director reports to an active, engaged Board of Directors consisting of 15 members who bring diverse skills, ministry experience, and governance leadership.

Leadership Challenges and Opportunities

Like many retreat centers, Spirit in the Desert is challenged to maintain strong financial footing to support programs and to fund ongoing capital improvement projects and new facilities. This is increasingly difficult in the context of national declines in retreat attendance and reduced financial support for retreat centers from congregations and their individual members.

Spirit in the Desert brings substantial assets to this challenge, including an outstanding location and physical environment, a dedicated staff and board, an excellent reputation for hospitality and grace, and a track record of successfully nurturing lives through healing, renewal and growth.

The Executive Director has the opportunity to lead in further developing and promoting these strengths to increase:

- Visibility of SITD in the local community, the metropolitan area, regionally and nationally
- Awareness of SITD among regional and national organizations
- Partnerships with ecumenical, interfaith, community groups, and other nonprofit organizations
- Philanthropic support for SITD to build an endowment that can support capital investments to maintain and expand facilities in addition to supplementing operating income to cover a proportion of service costs (currently about 20%)

Success in growing visibility, awareness, and partnerships of Spirit in the Desert will lead to increasing retreat participation and donor support, enabling further expansion of services. We understand that inspiring and leading this maturation will require a dedicated and capable Executive Director.

Nominations and Applications

Review of nominations and applications will begin immediately, and nominations and expressions of interest will be welcomed until an appointment is made. The appointee is anticipated to fully take office by July 1, 2026.

Applications received by January 15, 2026 will be assured of full consideration. Applications should include a letter of interest showing alignment with the mission of SITD, resume, and names of five professional references with email addresses and telephone numbers. Calls to references will occur later in the search process and with prior notification of candidates. All submissions will be treated in confidence and should be sent electronically in PDF format to Melissa Maxwell-Doherty: melissa.maxwelldoherty@gmail.com.

To nominate a candidate for consideration, please contact Melissa Maxwell-Doherty with the candidate name and contact information.