

2018 Outdoor Ministry Working Group Report for the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ Board

Final Report

November 2018

Our Charge:

At the request of the Board of Directors of the Minnesota Conference of the United Church of Christ, the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee and staff formed a special working group to look at Pilgrim Point Camp & Retreats and its role in the life of the conference going forward. The special working group contracted with William Bourdon, Executive Director of the Outdoor Ministries Association United Church of Christ, to help facilitate the process. The working group is made up of individuals who are members of the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee, members of the Minnesota Conference UCC Board of Directors, and staff.

As it is the Conference's Board of Directors' role to define mission, staffing, and the allocation of resources for the Conference, the working group sees their role as advisory. We evaluated possible scenarios for the Board to consider. Ultimately this report, along with the current strategic discernment process being conducted by the Conference's Board of Directors, will determine the next steps for Outdoor Ministry in the Minnesota Conference.

Our Process:

On September 28th staff and six members of the working group met with Dave Holtz (the Executive Director of Luther Crest). We talked about Pilgrim Point's ongoing partnership with Luther Crest, as well as the identification of five possible scenarios of how Pilgrim Point could transition over the next five to twenty years. The scenarios were developed by Bill Bourdon after discussions with Kevin Brown in preparation for these meetings. They represent discussions that have taken place at various settings of the Conference but have not been looked at in total before.

On Saturday the 29th we were joined by two additional working group members. Our first step was to read and discuss a white paper addressing outdoor ministry issues throughout the United Church of Christ. (The paper is an addendum to this document.)

Our second step was to enter into a participatory exercise to identify how faith formation and outdoor ministry should be prioritized in the Minnesota Conference. For this activity the working group invited six youth to participate. They were from the New York Mills, Wadena, and Robbinsdale congregations. The youth were at Pilgrim Point for the fall work day, and graciously joined in the conversation.

Our third step was to thank the youth for participating, and ask the working group to focus on a discussion of the five scenarios. By the end of our time together we had listed the strengths and challenges of the five scenarios and ranked them according to our preferences. We realized that the partial sale of property as a sixth option was not fully discussed and the consultant also realized that we did not talk about what it might look like to have Pilgrim Point be a separate not for profit corporation. Both of these items were added to our October 27th agenda.

On October 27th the task force, staff and consultant were joined by additional members of the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee. The preliminary report had been distributed to the whole body and our task on this day was to review the report and answer questions. We began by listing questions the group had posed and then providing answers.

The question was raised as to how much support both in cash and in-kind the Conference contributes to Pilgrim Point. Kevin shared that the support is found in various budgets of the Conference and has not been fully transparent to all parties in the past. Following is a breakdown of the average annual Ashley allocation that supports ministry at Pilgrim Point:

Estimated Average Annual Ashley Allocation

- \$ 55,000 Pilgrim Point Operations
- \$ 65,000 Staff Support (40% ACM Comp/Ben + Registrar Comp + Other Admin)
- \$ 10,000 Program Support (all youth and intergenerational program expenses)
- \$ 3,000 Pilgrim Point Camp Committee
- \$133,000 Total average annual expenses

The above numbers do not include accounting and financial reporting services provided by the Conference. In addition to these annual expenditures, Pilgrim Point has received significant funding from Ashley over the last ten years for capital replacement needs and facilities upgrades, including: major roofing projects for Lodge, Annex, Dining Hall and Rec Hall, HVAC for Dining Hall & Rec Hall, and other projects. These projects have averaged about \$50,000.00 per year.

As an example: When all sources are added, income and expenditures at Pilgrim Point could run about \$333,000: \$133,000.00 Ashley Funds, \$50,000.00 capital projects, \$108,000.00 fees and charges, \$42,000 gifts. A typical fully-utilized seasonal operation with 144 youth beds would normally have a budget of \$450,000.00, of which fees and charges would be 80% or \$360,000.00. Gifts and support should make up the 20% balance.

What we have learned through the process:

Bill Bourdon helped provide a historical context for outdoor ministries within the United Church of Christ and other denominational traditions over the past 40 years. He described a window of opportunity in the 1980s and 1990s when leadership within many judicatories and church-related camps began to realize their population was aging, resulting in a need for year round

facilities for adults and families. It is during this time that other Midwest UCC conferences like Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa were building new year round buildings at their sites.

When the Minnesota Conference explored the feasibility of a capital campaign for Pilgrim Point in 2014, it is possible that support for the campaign fell short because the window of opportunity that other camps and judicatories had recognized in the 80s and 90s had closed. While there were certainly other factors affecting the fundraising capacity within the Conference, the timing in relationship to these larger historical trends should not be overlooked.

One of the best local examples of the right timing for growth in Outdoor Ministry is Luther Crest. The working group conversation with Dave Holtz revealed that the histories of Pilgrim Point and Luther Crest are drastically different. Where forty years ago the operations were much alike, today there is a dramatic difference.

Through forty years of full time professional outdoor ministry leadership at Luther Crest the facilities have been built to serve an adult population, year round buildings have been constructed, seasonal buildings removed, and both the program and the operation have grown significantly. Luther Crest's facilities have been built to meet the needs of today's congregations and youth, whereas Pilgrim Point remained essentially the same.

As you look at Luther Crest today they are ten times the size of Pilgrim Point's operation and have 10 full time and 50 seasonal staff. The number of churches they serve and the membership in those churches is comparable to that of the Minnesota Conference.

Another piece of Luther Crest's success has been that they have provided solid youth programming that reinforces the teachings and faith development programs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Their ministry model is balanced, with a strong youth summer camp program (2,000-plus campers) and a retreat season that fulfills their year round capacity of 250.

One key difference that is important to note when comparing Pilgrim Point and Luther Crest is the geographic distribution of the congregations who relate to each camp. While the total membership of each camp's constituent congregations is roughly the same, Pilgrim Point serves congregations distributed throughout the state of Minnesota, while Luther Crest primarily serves congregations within a 2-hour drive from their location.

Following the conversation with Dave Holtz, the working group reviewed the white paper presented by Bill Bourdon. Our discussion led to the realization that there is no single way to do outdoor ministry. It is also clear that as other settings found and identified new ways of being in ministry over the past twenty years, Pilgrim Point has been lagging far behind.

Potential New Approaches for Faith Formation Ministries:

Our mission discernment process with the working group and youth strived to identify the role of the Conference in affirming and supporting outdoor ministry as a primary space of faith formation for individuals, families and congregations. The Faith Forming Five initiative of the Conference was discussed as a possible way to frame the Conference's outdoor ministry programs and initiatives moving forward. Kevin Brown presented the key dimensions of the Faith Forming Five to open the conversation about how these areas of ministry focus might inform the Conference's vision for Outdoor Ministries:

- All-ages worship
- At-home faith practices
- Intergenerational community
- Opportunities for service, justice, and reflection
- Leadership development for all ages

Key Point:

The working group and youth came to overwhelming consensus that the Conference should see outdoor ministry as a primary opportunity for leadership development for youth and young adults, whether that occurs at Pilgrim Point Camp or in other places, and innovative ways moving forward. The group also identified a programing methodology that creates space to experience God through the wonder of creation and is rooted in extravagant welcome for all.

As we moved through this process and expanded the conversation to include members of the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee, we spent time talking about how the above understandings might translate into ministry initiatives and programs. We began this part of our conversation with Kevin Brown sharing some reflections on recent experiences.

Youth participation in programming at Pilgrim Point has declined over the past several years, just as youth participation in the life of the wider-church has continued to decline. However, over the past year we've discovered that there are places with huge energy that we've been able to tap into. Most notably, was the Conference-sponsored youth delegation to March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C.

The conference was in a unique position to be able to support and stand with our youth. As a result, 14 youth participated in this unprecedented experience both to participate in the march and lobby Congress. This experience brought together youth from 8 different congregations in the span of a week. The Conference hadn't done anything like that before. Half of the participants were from churches that have long participated in Conference youth programming at Pilgrim Point, and about half represented new congregations and new youth who had not previously been connected to Conference-sponsored programs.

The March for Our Lives experience opened the possibility for subsequent events, such as 2019 Youth Faith & Justice Trip to Chicago and Milwaukee. The Conference is beginning to open a broader conversation about youth leadership development and what that might look like.

The Vision:

We are in a rare and privileged position in the Minnesota Conference to have substantial financial resources, a creative and innovative network of faith formation leaders, and experienced staff leaders, and we are beginning to catch some glimpses of the bold new ministries that the Spirit is calling us to. Although we do not yet have a clear vision, Kevin Brown and Lori Alford shared some exciting ideas that are beginning to bubble up:

- A formal leadership development initiative for rising high-school juniors that connects them and their parents to mentors from within the Conference
- A new model for Our Whole Lives that will bring in youth from regional churches, with the possibility of inviting high school youth to be trained as peer sexuality educators
- Wilderness experiences for families and/or youth; opportunities to experience awe and wonder in God's creation and to learn about sustainability and environmental justice
- Immersive travel experiences for youth and intergenerational groups designed to help folk explore and grow; these can focus on justice advocacy, legislative lobbying, faith-based community organizing, and spiritual exploration
- Developing a formal leadership development cycle for youth and young adults that affords the opportunity for young leaders to interact with children, other youth, and adults in faith communities around the state and region to host programs and trainings

Scenario Discussions:

The committee reviewed possible scenarios or outcomes. The scenarios are based on paths forward over the next five, ten or twenty years. The scenarios are not necessarily mutually exclusive options, and some combination may be taken as interim steps toward sustainable ministry at Pilgrim Point. Our goal is to provide the Conference Board of Directors as much information as we can to inform the strategic discernment process.

Each of the scenarios is discussed in detail below. Our dialog led to an understanding that there is a new conversation about the possibility of the sale of a portion of the property, so that was put into the discussion as a modification of selling all of the property.

During the working group meeting on October 27, a question was raised regarding whether there would be an advantage if Pilgrim Point Camps & Retreats were spun off to be a separate corporation. The group discussed this issue in detail and has included this item as a separate scenario in this final report.

The scenarios are listed below with notations and can be grouped into the following three broad categories:

CONTINUE with existing facilities

- Scenario 1. Continuing the status quo
- Scenario 2. Turning over management to a third party
- Scenario 3. Long term lease agreement ten years or more

INVEST in new facilities

- Scenario 4. Making a significant investment in staff and facilities
- Scenario 5. Divesting of some property and utilizing resources to upgrade facility

DIVEST all camp property

Scenario 6. Divesting entire property & earmarking funds for programmatic activities

Scenario 7. Separately incorporating Pilgrim Point Camps & Retreats

1. Continuing the Status Quo

No one really wants to continue with what we have been doing with Pilgrim Point over the past decades. Current buildings are not designed for church retreats and youth camp is only one week out of the season. The current facility has limited appeal for outside rental groups, and a great deal of time and Ashley funds are spent in relation to the limited programming offered.

2. Turning over Management to a Third Party

We had a good discussion on this option, with a variety of possible not-for-profits mentioned. Concerns were expressed that the Conference would continue to hold responsibility for capital expenses and this scenario might also require some upfront investment to address deferred maintenance and capital replacement expenses that the third party management group could require before entering an agreement. The working group also concluded that this step could be another way of delaying the process of a slow death. The upside was that professional management would free up Conference staff so that they could focus on other youth-focused programming. Another benefit identified was the possibility of reducing the Ashley allocation for Pilgrim Point, as the third party manager would be responsible for sustaining the operational revenue for Pilgrim Point. However; it might take a number of supporting years to get the business up to an operation that is self-sustaining.

3. Long Term Lease Agreement Ten Years or More

Pilgrim Point has had a history with the Wayzata Church leasing the property, as well as a strong working relationship with Luther Crest. While nothing is currently in place, this may be an option and this scenario keeps the property in Conference ownership. It may be a way for others to upgrade the facilities, and may transfer some risk away from the Conference. As both of these options would utilize the camp as a youth facility it is unlikely that upgrades would move Pilgrim Point into a more adult facility.

This scenario would require the Conference to seek out potential partners to lease space. The scenario could involve leasing the entire property for the full season (with the possible option of renting back specific times for Conference programs), leasing all or part of the facilities for a portion of the season (similar to the previous agreement with Wayzata), or a combination of lease arrangements.

This model had some support from the working group and is seen as a model that may be less divisive within the Conference. Current levels of staffing and financial support would remain.

4. Making a Significant Investment in Staff and Facilities

Setting outdoor ministry as the priority of the Conference was discussed and is seen as a twenty-year process. All buildings will need to be replaced with year round adult and family friendly spaces, full-time professional leadership will need to be put in place and a great “buy-

in” by the Conference and congregations. Significant investment was discussed in the 2010 and 2018 reports by Kaleidoscope, and has not gained traction in the life of the Conference. The Conference also looked at the possibility of a capital campaign with a feasibility study in 2014; that study showed a lack of donor capacity in the Conference to support such a campaign, and less than full consensus regarding making that kind of investment at Pilgrim Point.

While a revitalized year round facility serving 150 should generate enough revenue to pay for itself, it would most likely serve primarily non-UCC groups 75-85% of the time and need to be managed by an outside entity. In the short term this would be a 5-6-million-dollar investment. Long term upkeep of the facility would still be the responsibility of the Conference. With the shift in utilization toward outside rental groups, Ashley Funds may or may not be applicable to help underwrite the operation. The working group does not see this scenario as a viable option.

5. Divesting of Some Property and Utilizing Resources to Upgrade the Facility

A limited divestment of twenty acres (where the tent and trailer end of the property is) has been looked at as an option. The funds from the sale could be applied to upgrade and/or replace some of the existing facilities so that they are more appropriate to our mission. The issue around security and privacy issues with new unrelated neighbors was expressed.

This development might combine funds from the sale of property with funds from the dining hall insurance settlement to fully fund the 2-3-million-dollar project.

Either through new buildings or renovation of existing buildings a 50 bed year round retreat complex seems doable. This scenario could place the operation in a more favorable light for rentals, but it will not free up the Conference from long-term investment requirements. As Conference staff have little expertise in marketing and management an outside firm should be utilized for this operation.

While the new facility should generate enough revenue to cover the operating budget this would require full utilization and renting out to non-UCC groups 50-75% of the time. There may also be startup costs with new management building the operation.

Long term investment and upkeep of the facility would be the responsibility of the Conference and, depending on the utilization of the new retreat center, Ashley Funds may or may not be applicable to help underwrite the operation. However, Faith Formation staff should be freed up to run programs and not be saddled with operating the facility.

6. Divesting Entire Property & Earmarking Funds for Programmatic Activities

This may be the boldest of the options but it may also be the best way to grow and strengthen the outdoor ministry program. At this point in time, between direct support and staff support of Pilgrim Point, the Conference is spending a considerable amount of funds serving a small percentage of the Conference while not meeting programmatic goals.

If the Conference was not saddled with the property, other program opportunities and partnerships could be considered. The Conference could explore options for family programs at national UCC sites like the Moon Beach family camp site in Wisconsin, or such sacred places as Star Island off the Maine Coast, Blowing Rock Conference Center in the Blue Ridge Mountains, or Laforet in the Black Forest of Colorado. Youth camps could take place at sacred ground owned by other denominations that might be in a more central location to your population. New youth immersion experiences could take place in urban centers around the country as well as travel programs and spiritual pilgrimages both inside and outside the United States.

Other new youth leadership programs could emerge that grow youth leaders in a variety of settings. One scenario discussed was working with youth in a four-week leadership program between their junior and senior years of high school and again as college students serving as staff for youth events. The savings in current dollars going into Pilgrim Point to underwrite the operation could be used for growing these new programs.

7. Separately Incorporating Pilgrim Point Camps & Retreats

One of the questions was whether there would be an advantage if the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee and operation were spun off to be a separate corporation. At this point in time the facility has no operational staff, does not have a marketing or registration staff person, does not have a financial development program, and does not have a full season of either sponsored or rental programs.

The new corporation would lose operational, administrative, and oversight support from Conference staff (40%+ of the time from the Associate Conference Minister for Faith Formation, reservation and administrative support from the Registrar, and financial reporting and accounting functions. The new entity could lose annual support from the Ashley Endowment and other Conference support. Furthermore, unless the Conference is willing to gift a five-million-dollar asset the new corporation would also be saddled with significant debt.

If Pilgrim Point was currently in a place of financial and operational stability separate incorporation might be a viable option to consider. However, starting from a place of significant financial, operational, and staffing deficits make it highly unlikely that this option would be successful.

Comments and Conclusions:

The working group was not able, nor was it attempting, to come to a consensus around any one concept. We also do not see the above scenarios as mutually exclusive options. For example, the Conference could choose to lease to a third party for 10 years and run a variety of programs at other settings. Or the Conference could sell a portion of the property, utilize the funds to endow the ongoing maintenance costs, and contract with a third party like Luther Crest or UCCR to manage the operation.

The working group did reach a general agreement that it is time to make significant changes at Pilgrim Point, and that continuing as things have been is not an option. The current manner of operation is too expensive to be sustainable and has not and will not steward the property into the future. The working group and the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee have identified a series of questions to raise to the Board of Directors:

- Will outdoor ministry be a missional and ministry priority for the Minnesota Conference?
- If so, how or will Pilgrim Point support the Conference's vision for outdoor ministry?
- If so, will the Conference invest new capital resources and ongoing operational and facilities funding, so that Pilgrim Point can serve as a robust, multi-season center for outdoor ministry for the next 15-20 years?

The working group has wrestled with the scenarios outlined above and considered the outdoor ministry that has been delivered outside Pilgrim Point in the last year. In these discussions, the working group identified a series of problem definitions. These definitions come from needs that recurred throughout discussions and across all the scenarios. These problem definitions are identified below:

1. There is a need across the Minnesota Conference to maintain current opportunities and create new spaces for intergenerational ministry in adult and family-friendly spaces.
2. There is a growing need for the Conference to develop new models and structures for youth faith formation and leadership development programs in new settings and locations around the state and beyond.
3. To discern and develop these new youth and intergenerational ministry initiatives, the Conference will need to reallocate staff resources and Ashley funding currently focused on ministries at Pilgrim Point.
4. Less than 20% of Conference congregations participate in programs at Pilgrim Point each year, and many conference youth participate in outdoor ministry opportunities at locations other than Pilgrim Point. To achieve greater congregational and youth participation, additional programming locations need to be considered beyond Pilgrim Point.
5. Pilgrim Point operates near capacity for only one week of family camp, one week of youth camp and 4 weekends of retreat programming each season.
6. To achieve sustainability at Pilgrim Point, as much as 75-85% of all rental utilization may need to come from groups outside the United Church of Christ, depending on the programmatic model and facilities footprint.

7. To sustain outdoor ministry broadly and Pilgrim Point specifically, a governance structure is needed that clearly defines decision-making authority.

We hope this report will help move forward the conversation regarding future ministry at Pilgrim Point and will provide helpful perspective and insight for the Board of Directors as they move through the broader strategic discernment process for the Minnesota Conference United Church of Christ. The Working Group and the Pilgrim Point Camp Committee welcome the opportunity to support the Board's work of discernment during the coming months.

Sincerely,

Members of the Outdoor Ministries Working Group:

Pilgrim Point Camp Committee:

Gary Balcome, Tenessa Gemelke, Nancy Johnson-Maloney, Scott Keehn (chair), Mark Lorenzen, Janet Tripp, and Tim Wulling

MN Conference Board of Directors:

Leslie Amundson and Ray Croaston

MN Conference Staff:

Lori Alford, Kevin Brown, and Sheri Nelson (2018 PPC Chaplain)

Representatives from Conference Congregations:

Amy Wick Moore (United Church of Christ New Brighton)

Consultant:

William Bourdon

5 Rayo Del Sol

Cedar Crest, NM

828-773-7503

Addenda: White Paper on Outdoor Ministry in the United Church of Christ
Author: William Bourdon