

2021 Michigan Annual Conference

Report of Camp Board | Stuart Smith & David Berkey

June 4, 2021

Stuart Smith shares.

Hi there. My name is Stuart Smith, the current board chair of the Michigan Area United Methodist Camping organization and today we are speaking to you from Wesley Woods Camp and Retreat Center. As you can see, and will see throughout our time together today, God has blessed us with amazing properties to help us deliver on filling our mission of providing faith forming programming and experiences for all our campers.

On behalf of the entire Camping Board, we appreciate the opportunity to talk with you again this year and update you on the progress we have made on fulfilling this invaluable mission and ministry.

As we mentioned last year, we developed and instituted a new Strategic Plan for the organization which includes a new vision and focus on programming while concentrating our camp and retreat experiences to three locations: Wesley Woods Camp and Retreat Center, Lake Huron Retreat Center, and Lake Michigan Camp & Retreat.

Despite the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Board remains committed to this new Strategic Plan and are working on various aspects of this plan to ensure the organization will remain strong and viable in the post-COVID-19 world.

A significant part of this new Strategic Plan is a renewed and directed focus on our programming, which Rev David Berkey, our new Executive Director, will lead and cover in his comments. The other aspect of this Strategic Plan called for significant upgrades and improvements at our three camp locations. To assist in funding these improvements, we informed you last year of the difficult decision to close and sell Judson Collins Center and Lakeview Family Campground. We also continued to market for sale the Crystal Springs Campground & Retreat Center, which we unfortunately had to close in 2019.

Earlier this year, we completed the sale of the Judson Collins and the Lakeview Campground properties. Recently, we accepted an offer on the Crystal Springs property from the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians. This sale is not expected to close until the summer of 2021. Out of respect to all those campers and people with deep connections to these sites, we conducted a Decommissioning Service at Judson Collins and at Lakeview, with a planned service at Crystal Springs as we get closer to the actual closing date. We want to thank Bishop Bard for taking the time out of his busy schedule to lead the services at Judson Collins and Lakeview and hope his schedule will allow him to do the same at Crystal Springs.

These Decommission Services allow people to visit the sites one last time and recount all the great memories and vibrant ministries which occurred there over the years. We recognize the deep emotional attachment many people have to these sites and are committed to honoring these memories, along with the numerous gifts received over time, by placing Memorial Boards at our remaining camp locations.

One of the other tasks the Board undertook this past year was the development of a Master Plan for our three camp and retreat centers. This Master Plan identifies the key property and facility improvements needed at each location to ensure their operations are sustainable well into the future. This work was led by Kaleidoscope, in collaboration with

the architectural team at DK Design Group and included defining and quantifying the facility needs at each location in relation to the planned ministry and programming unique to each location, assessing and reviewing all aspects of each property, developing an initial property layout showing areas of improvement or development, and creating conceptual plans of new or improved facilities.

This Master Plan was presented to our Board in March of this year and as you can imagine, there was a lot to absorb and understand within these plans. We need to take into consideration, not only the

importance of our programming and camper experience, but also our ability to fund these projects. Although the recent sale of camp properties can help cover some of the anticipated costs, we do need to address a number of deferred renovation projects while keeping funds available for future investments.

A small Task Force of our Board has already reviewed this work and have identified a number of key priority projects which we look to get started on right away. Here at Wesley Woods, this would include the development of a new recreation area which would include challenge courses, a mountain bike course, and a soccer, utility type field. Also, two new cabin type pavilions with restrooms will be added and located close to the current pods of cabins, allowing campers access to a restroom without having to walk to the updated central bathhouse. Finally, we will complete a general renewal or refresh to a number of the existing buildings such as the main lodge, the offices, and a number of smaller deferred maintenance type projects.

At Lake Michigan, this would include two new bathhouses, one on the North Side of camp and one on the South Side of camp, along with two new toilet houses on the South Side of camp. Similar to Wesley Woods, the goal is to provide restroom facilities in close proximity to the current cluster of tents, cabins and campsites. Finally, in keeping with the same concept, the restrooms in the Dining Hall will be reworked and updated, which will also allow us to now use this building year-round, which will be great for late fall, winter, and early spring retreats!!

Although the facilities at Lake Huron are structurally sound and well maintained, they are still in need of some updates and improvements. The heating and cooling systems in the Littleton and Ragland buildings will be replaced and updated along with the roofs on Ragland and the office building.

This may seem like a lot (and it is!), but these are the core foundational projects needed to help us deliver the quality programming our campers expect and deserve! There are more projects to come and we are developing materials to share which will help you understand and visualize all these changes and updates.

Finally, the other key initiative during the past year was to search and hire a new Executive Director. Rev. David Berkey joined us this past fall in this key leadership position. David comes to us most recently from the Cal-Pac Conference and brings a wealth of experience in leading and developing camping ministries across the US. Although he will probably miss visiting the United Methodist Camp in Hawaii, we hope he finds the lakes of Michigan to be equally appealing.

Before handing this off to David, who will provide a bit more on his background and an update on our operations, on behalf of the entire Board, we would like to thank you for your support and prayers over the past year. The last year has certainly been challenging, but our resolve to become a viable, self-sustaining camping ministry remains strong. We continue to hear how people are eager to come back to camp when it is safe to do so and are working hard to provide them with an experience built around our core principles of providing a meaningful Faith Formation programming along with a comfortable bed, a warm shower, and good food.

Now, I would like to introduce you to our new Executive Director, the Rev. David Berkey.

David Berkey shares.

Hello Michigan Methodists! I am so pleased to be with you as the Executive Director of Michigan Area United Methodist Camping, though I do have a confession – I am a native of Cleveland, OH, with all that entails. The good news is that I spent many wonderful summers growing up vacationing with family in Michigan on the lakes, in motel pools, and visiting cousins in Saginaw. My mother never missed her birthday chocolate cake sundae at Bill Knapp's! Pure Michigan is a wonderful place for people of all ages to be renewed by God's creation outdoors and our mission is to help Pure Methodists find more and more opportunities to grow in faith together.

I have come here via pastoral work in the New York Conference and 25 years of service at the conference level in camp and retreat ministries in the Eastern PA, Florida and California-Pacific conferences. As the church undergoes radical change with the culture of the 21st century, COVID, and so

many critical issues around mental health, racism, and the environment – now more than ever outdoor experiences in community with others is so important and needed.

The organization of the Michigan Area United Methodist Camping has been through the challenging stages of forming a new entity, with ups and downs, achievements and failures, and it is now set on firm ground, ready to serve the Michigan Conference as a key partner in discipleship formation. I want to share with you a few of the operational changes that have positioned us for a sustainable future:

First of all, we have reduced staff and eliminated a central office location in order to be more nimble and financially sound. There is a St. Johns P.O. Box (134) instead of a St. Johns office and we have utilized technology to have fewer staff accomplishing greater things.

Second, financially, we received two PPP loans to cover payroll and fixed costs within the past year and re-organized our resources to provide only needed operational services until we can fully re-open.

Lastly, as we receive funds from the sale of camps, we are clear about setting these aside for capital improvements at Wesley Woods, Lake Huron and Lake Michigan sites. We are grateful for the help by the Michigan United Methodist Foundation in caring for these funds critical to a sustainable future and separating them from operations.

As we prepare for a great summer and a time of safe re-opening, we are grateful for our site staff and directors' hard work, especially directors Ann Emerson at Lake Huron, Nicole Holton at Wesley Woods and our new director at Lake Michigan, Erik Bengston. We had to say good-bye this past year to Dana Hunt at Lake Michigan and Cindy Haynes at Lakeview, both of whom provided outstanding leadership over many years.

When being interviewed for this position, I asked the question, “Are we camp properties that happen to run programs or are we a program ministry that happens to own camps?” The answer that came back was what I was looking for – we are a program ministry seeking to “create transformative camp and retreat experiences that develop disciples of Jesus Christ.”

To that end I want you to think of Michigan Area United Methodist Camping as your partner in the discipleship journey for all ages. We hope to be your go-to resource for everything from mid-winter retreats to summer kayak adventures. As professionals in the field (literally) we can provide the structure for a spiritually renewing, discipleship enriching experience for children, youth, young adults, older adults, and families.

So, there are three ways this can happen: One is by registering for an event that we are leading – individual registrations, our program. Another is by booking an event for your church group at one of our sites – we are the host providing Christian hospitality. And finally, we are seeking partnerships to provide hybrid experiences where we work

together on the process and the outcomes. An example this summer is our work with the Urban Camp out of Detroit holding its event at Camp Michindoh. We are also networking with Michigamgee, Lake Louise and Bayshore to be mutually supportive in expanding our outreach to all of Michigan.

Which brings me to summer and summer camp! Yes, we are reopening in 2021 for a summertime to ReConnect, ReCreate and ReNew! Our team of volunteer deans, along with our staff, have been preparing for months for this long-awaited return. We have worked diligently with the American Camp Association, the CDC and local and state

officials to provide protocols that seek to keep everyone safe. Capacities are reduced, we will do as much as possible outside, and we will keep campers in cohorts or pods throughout the week to better manage a healthy environment. But it will still be CAMP, and it is back, better than ever! The bathhouse here at Wesley Woods is practically a new creation and we can't wait for you to see it!

God is with us as we seek to enrich lives through the camp and retreat experience for all in Michigan who yearn more than ever to reconnect, recreate and renew their relationship with Jesus Christ and one another outdoors. Keep us in prayer and join us on the journey!

