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**Gathering Space Feasibility Task Force**

**Report to the 185th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, Nov 15-16, 2024**

***Is it feasible for the Diocese of MO to pursue creating a space for the Diocese to gather together for shared ministry, formation, recreation and fun as an intentional step towards exploring the ways we can come together while sharing the Good News with others??*** This was the charge that Bishop Deon Johnson presented, following the 2021 diocesan convention, to the 17 people who responded with a “yes” to his invitation to explore this question further.

About a dozen people from that first group began to wrestle with the question in early 2022. By year-end a standard list of interview questions had been developed, as well as a list of over 100 people from within the diocese and in the industry that the team felt could yield helpful input if interviewed, including some who might help in a possible future funding phase. We entered the 2022 diocesan convention with nearly 60 ideas of what a “Gathering Space” might be or consist of. Gathering Space Table Conversations with delegates, clergy and guests during convention yielded 130 response cards, adding many thoughtful concerns and wonderful ministry ideas to our data. This was followed in early 2023 with a survey via the weekly diocesan eNewsletter to gather other ideas from those who had not attended the 2022 convention. We were fortunate to have Ms. Katie Ong join us during the year to help facilitate our progress.

During 2023 the Task Force visited and/or interviewed Directors of fifteen camps/conference centers within the boundaries of the Diocese, at least five centers outside of the Diocesan boundaries, organizers of conferences and retreats, and other diocesan influencers. Our conclusion reported to the 184th Annual Convention was that **YES** - it is feasible for the Diocese of Missouri to pursue this dream of a gathering space! First, however, the diocese needs time to develop a ***culture of gathering together***before leaping forward to establish a large gathering space. The Task Force recommended that we ***Start Smaller***; obtain experience on a smaller scale (in the range of 20-75 people) at an established gathering venue or meeting/retreat center. We would also investigate sharing an existing gathering space or partnering with an established camp and/or retreat center that is already offering programs similar to what people across this diocese might want so we can learn before we leap.

While the geography of the Diocese does not allow for the drive from every church to a gathering space to be less than 1.5 hours (as early surveys identified as high on the wish list), there appeared a potential opportunity to partner with a camp that is less than 1.5 hours away for 74% of our parishes and under 2 hours for ~86%. There was also the opportunity to investigate partnering with a mid-size retreat center that’s less than 2 hours away for ~93% of our parishes. Many upgrades would first be needed, however, for this to be viable for comfortable overnight retreats. Yet this demonstrated that there were possibilities and opportunities out there that the task force continued to follow up on.

Considering a ‘micro-retreat center’ philosophy - modest accommodations with some land for smaller retreats and short stays - over the past year the Task Force has also continued to follow up on looking at retreat centers farther away from Missouri that might demonstrate successful concepts that could be emulated here. It’s been difficult to pursue offering near-term retreat programs to help experiment with and develop a culture of gathering, as retreat venues for 2024 and 2025 events were found to have already been reserved in 2023 due to limited availability, and smaller retreats planned were cancelled due to lack of participation. Without this information, considering what staff support would be necessary to sufficiently support a smaller center(s), and evaluating what staffing and other basic expenses would be needed to grow into a larger venue, has not been possible.

Hoping to find out more about what our children are looking for in a camping experience, task force members spoke with Camp Phoenix campers (and counselors) this August to record their likes, dislikes, and ideas for future camp experiences. And pursuing an idea suggested by Bishop Deon, the Task Force ran with planning and executing the First Annual Diocesan Picnic in September at the UCC’s Camp MoVal in Union MO. Over 100 family and friends of the Diocese registered for the event, with 23 of 41 parishes represented. Based on after-picnic surveys, the event was quite a success, with 88% of respondents stating they’d like to attend a diocesan picnic next year and 12% saying maybe they’d attend. The input received to date over this study suggests that any venue that might be shared between a children’s camp and an adult retreat center would need separate, age-appropriate housing and meeting facility accommodations.

After three years of surveying, interviewing, visiting and discussing, the task force’s recommendation to Bishop Deon is that we identify a temporary site partner that could offer many of the needs of our youth camp and be a site for adult retreats, close to the geographic (driving) center of the diocese. We haven’t found an adequate adult retreat center mid-diocese that wouldn’t take a large investment in time and treasure to modernize; we would need to find land in that area and build. Our recommendation is that the Diocese of Missouri seek a potential partnership with the UCC’s Camp MoVal near Union MO, where we held our first diocesan-wide picnic for a “test run” that received positive evaluation scores from all post-survey respondents. The UCC is rehabbing two buildings at Camp MoVal to accommodate camp counselor facilities and has ample space on the camp’s 140 acres for a possible modern retreat center to be built in the future. The Task Force recommend this as the best option at this time. It provides the opportunity for a partnership with another faith community to spread the Good News, and offers a path forward to the Bishop’s desire to have a space that youths and adults can gather together, in both small and large groups, for shared ministry, formation, recreation and fun.

We stand ready to talk, advise, and share data with the leadership of the diocese as next steps are determined. This concludes the efforts of the Gathering Space Feasibility Task Force, and in its sun-setting we thank the Bishop and the diocese as a whole for the opportunity, and your continued support, to work on this important undertaking.

**With much appreciation and thanks to the Gathering Space Task Force members active during 2024:**

The Rev. Dn. Betty Bowen (Trinity - St. Charles)

Ms. Betty Bowersox, Co-Chair (Grace – Kirkwood)

The Rev. Dn. Loretta Go (St. Stephen’s – Ferguson)

The Rev. Kevin McGrane, Co-Chair (Trinity – St. James)

The Rev. Bill Nesbit (Grace – Jefferson City)

Ms. Annette Webb (Calvary – Columbia)

Ms. Machelle West (All Saints & Ascension - Northwoods)

Facilitator - Ms. Katie Ong (Consultant for Strategic Visioning)

On behalf of the Task Force from the Co-Chairs:

The Rev. Kevin McGrane & Betty L. Bowersox