

**Camp Forward Team
Final Report
November 1, 2024**

Membership:

- Rev. Tracy Heilman, Site Director of Tower Hill
- Mitch Kloster, Site Director of Pilgrim Park
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BACKGROUND

Camps today are facing numerous challenges. Even before the pandemic, it was often difficult to find needed staff. In addition, the increasing number of insurance and regulatory demands made camp operations both more expensive and increasingly complicated.

During the period before the pandemic, both Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill were able to maintain their usage, and even show slight growth, but it was getting harder and harder to recruit campers and camps, particularly with respect to the traditional UCC camps. This was probably due in large part, as it is today, to declining numbers in congregations throughout the UCC Illinois Conference. The pandemic then caused a significant decline in revenue and usage for both camps. Moreover, during the pandemic, attitudes about sending campers to camp dramatically changed. Even in 2024, usage for many camps have not fully returned to pre-pandemic levels.

As a result of these many factors, it has been difficult for the camps to simply make ends meet, let alone modernize the camps in ways that would make them more attractive to campers in 2024 and truly grow and thrive in their mission. Although both camps have done extraordinary work to manage their budgets by finding new sources of revenue and cutting costs—and get closer to breaking even each year—there is a sense that both the Conference and the camps might benefit from exploring a different relationship.

On the camp side, becoming more independent would allow the camps to be more responsive and receptive to the non-Illinois Conference market and create more opportunities to take advantage of, for example, to host college and university groups as well as corporate retreats. On the Conference side, in addition to the continued—albeit smaller than in the past—financial contribution toward the camps from the Conference, the camps pose a particular challenge in terms of the annual ebb and flow of money. The camps typically have larger upfront expenses in the late winter and spring and generate large revenues over the summer. As the Conference

budget has evolved and there are fewer resources available, it has been more difficult for the Conference to “even out” these ups and downs.

In recognition of these challenges, the Conference put together the High Performance Team (“HPT”) in 2023, which provided a report to the Conference in 2023. (The full HPT Report is in Appendix A.) The HPT report recommended that a new committee explore the possibility of a transition for Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill to a more separate and independent status from the Illinois Conference while retaining a connection to the Conference. The Conference adopted that recommendation in November 2023, and the Camp Forward Team was brought together in early 2024.

The Camp Forward Team met several times throughout the spring and summer of 2024. We collected extensive information about Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill. We also collected information from several other camps, including conducting a series of interviews with personnel involved with each of the camps. Those camps had made similar transitions to what is proposed for Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill and thus offered lessons learned for our work.

Pilgrim Park

Pilgrim Park is in Princeton, Illinois. It was established in 1946 from a donation of 30 acres of land from two sisters who were urged to create the camp by Dr. Glen Lindley, Director of the Northern Area for the Illinois Conference of Congregational-Christian Churches. Pilgrim Park has grown to 155 acres that includes a mix of forest and prairie land. There are four main lodge buildings as well as eight cabins on site in addition to a pond, creek, pool, sports courts, team building courses, and trails. Pilgrim Park offers a variety of activities, including archery, nature walks, and exploring in paddleboats and canoes.

Tower Hill

Tower Hill is in Sawyer, Michigan. It was established in 1923 by a gift from E.K. Warren to the Congregational Church of Chicago (now the UCC Illinois Conference) and the Chicago City Missionary Society (now Community Renewal Society). Tower Hill has grown to 60 acres of old dune forest land and includes a private beach on Lake Michigan. It hosts visitors in a wide array of lodgings, including three retreat buildings, four A-frame buildings, a large conference center, cabins, cottages, and a campground. It too offers a variety of activities, including sand volleyball, archery, hiking, and orienteering.

Financials

Both camps operate budgets around \$500,000 annually. This means that, when combined, the annual budgets are close to \$1 million. Although the camps have generated more than 90% of their expenses in most years, the camps’ expenses and revenues now represent a relatively larger slice of the overall Illinois Conference budget.

Current Status of Camps

Pilgrim Park is currently fully owned by and part of the Illinois Conference.

Tower Hill is its own nonprofit entity registered in Michigan. Its articles of incorporation date from 1923 and its annual filings are available on the [State of Michigan's website](#). The two entities that are relevant to Tower Hill are the Illinois Conference and Community Renewal Society; both have interests in the property should the property no longer be used as a camp. More information about Tower Hill can be found in Appendix B.

CAMP FORWARD PROCESS

In addition to collecting information about Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill, the Camp Forward Team engaged with and collected information from several other camps and camp leaders to better understand the opportunities and challenges in changing the structure of our camps to become more independent. The materials collected can be found in Appendix C. Below we provide a summary of what we learned.

Camp Consultations and Information

Our team talked extensively with two well-known leaders in the camp community, Danny Pierce and Jim Schleif.

We talked first with Danny Pierce of Stronghold Camp and Retreat Center in Oregon, Illinois (<https://strongholdcenter.org/>). Danny is a former college professor who is now the Executive Director of Stronghold. Stronghold was part of the Presbyterian Church, but, after facing challenges similar to those of Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill, Stronghold became its own independent nonprofit entity. A five-year plan—which included the creation of bylaws and a board of directors as well as reimagining how to raise revenue and fundraise—was a key part of the transition for Stronghold. In addition, great care was taken to create a relationship between the Blackhawk Presbytery and Stronghold. To this day, among other things, the Presbytery still contributes financially to Stronghold.

Next, our team spoke with Jim Schleif, who is the Executive Director of UCCI in Wisconsin, the entity that manages the three UCC-affiliated camps in Wisconsin (<https://uccci.org/>). The UCCI has existed as independent from the Wisconsin Conference since 1967 and offers a long-term example of what the relationship between a conference and camps might include. Like the financial contribution to Stronghold from the Presbytery, the Wisconsin Conference provides \$130,000 annually to support the camps. In addition, when the Wisconsin camps faced very serious financial difficulty because of the pandemic, in 2022, the Wisconsin Conference purchased one of the camps to keep UCCI afloat and moved its conference offices to that site. As is clear from the financial support, the UCCI has a strong relationship with the Wisconsin Conference, something that is further reflected in its bylaws, operations, and board of directors.

Also like Stronghold, there is a heavy emphasis on fundraising at UCCI in addition to revenue generation.

We collected additional documents from UCCI and Stronghold as well as information, including organizational details and bylaws, for the following camps: Star Island in Portsmouth, NY; Ferry Beach, Saco, Maine; and Rowe Camp and Conference Center, Rowe, Maine. This information is found in Appendix C.

Nonprofit Information

The recommendation of HPT was to create separate nonprofits entities for Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill. The Camp Forward Team also considered a combined nonprofit entity like the UCCI to run both Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill, but, given that the camps operate in two different states and, more importantly, Tower Hill's existing nonprofit status and the obligations to Community Renewal Society, the work needed to create a combined nonprofit seemed much more complicated than the benefits that might flow from it.

In order for Pilgrim Park to become a nonprofit entity—or 501(c)(3) entity—in Illinois, it must (1) exist for a charitable purpose; (2) have a board of a board of directors who oversee the organization's operations, such as setting the mission, strategy, and goals for the organization; (3) have clear procedures and policies to guide operations and to measure how well the organization is achieving its goals; and (4) embrace significant fundraising in addition to revenue generation of operations. To make this transition, Pilgrim Park and the Conference must work with attorneys to draft and file Articles of Incorporation as well as the other forms, bylaws, and organizational documents that are required by federal, state, and local entities.

Tower Hill is a nonprofit entity in Michigan with articles of incorporation. Although we were unable to locate the most recent bylaws yet, its bylaws and other governance documents will need to change to reflect any new governance and operations, which will effectively separate Tower Hill from its current functioning within the Illinois Conference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our exploration and discussions, we offer the following three recommendations for moving forward:

Recommendation #1: Each Camp Functions as Its Own Nonprofit Entity

Given the financial challenges and the ways in which both the Illinois Conference and the camps continue to evolve and change, to better achieve the goals of all parties, we recommend that the camps become separate and independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations.

(a) Pilgrim Park will become its own 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity. It will be independent from but with ties to the Illinois Conference as further described below.

(b) Tower Hill will have its bylaws and organizational structure changed to make it independent from but with ties to the Illinois Conference as further described below.

Recommendation #2: Relationship Between the Illinois Conference and the Camps

(a) To best ensure success based on the experiences of and contributions to other camps that have been spun off, we strongly recommend that the Conference make the following investments in each camp:

- \$50,000 in 2025
- \$40,000 in 2026
- \$30,000 in 2027
- \$20,000 in 2028
- \$10,000 in 2029

The total over five years of these contributions to both camps is \$300,000. This is the only direct financial contribution requested that the Illinois Conference make to the camps.

(b) Each camp will be provided with the endowments and assets currently held by the Illinois Conference attributed to the camps.

(c) The Illinois Conference will hold a fundraising collection Camp Sunday annually for the camps. All proceeds will be given to the camps with any undesignated funds divided equally between the camps.

(d) The Illinois Conference will continue to partner with the camps to provide opportunities and lists for fundraising and will support the marketing of the camps by including the camps on its websites and other materials where appropriate.

(e) The Illinois Conference will continue to permit the staff of the camps to be part of the UCC benefits and insurance plans as they are today, with the camps paying the full costs of the employees covered by those plans.

(f) The camps will continue to welcome and nurture the Illinois Conference-related camps that currently use the camp sites. The camps will also partner with the Illinois Conference, through the Outdoor Ministries Committee, to help grow and encourage new summer camps and retreats. To this end, each camp site will hold at least two weeks in July on a first-come basis for Illinois Conference-related groups.

(g) The Praycation program will continue to be supported and will offer reduced rate stays at the camps for Illinois Conference personnel.

(h) Each camp board of directors, which will likely have between seven and eleven voting members, will have an ex officio member designated from the Illinois Conference. Each board will also have two voting members from Illinois Conference-affiliated churches.

(i) In the event that either Pilgrim Park or Tower Hill no longer continues to operate as a camp, all remaining assets would revert to the Illinois Conference (as well as Community Renewal Society for Tower Hill).

Recommendation #3: New Committee(s) and Timelines

(a) We recommend the creation of a committee to explore the process of unwinding the financial business (accounting, auditing, bookkeeping, assets, etc.) of the camps during 2025, with a goal of seamlessly separating the camps financially from the Illinois Conference by January 1, 2026.

(b) We recommend a committee (which could be the same committee working on (a)) consult with each camp, the Illinois Conference, and lawyers to draft new documents and file the necessary paperwork for the changes we propose with respect to creating a 501(c)(3) for Pilgrim Park and modifying bylaws and the organizational structure for Tower Hill. We believe this should occur over 2025, with a goal that the entities could begin to operate under the new structures by January 1, 2026.

CONCLUSION

We have appreciated the opportunity to be part of this important process in charting a new path forward for Pilgrim Park, Tower Hill, and the Conference. As you prayerfully consider our recommendations, we stand ready to answer questions and look forward to joining with others as we work together to fulfill the goals and live out the mission of the camps and the Conference on our journey ahead.