

# **Camp Forward Final Report 2024**

## **Appendix A**

### **2023 HPT REPORT**

# **CAMP FEASIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY FOR OUTDOOR MINISTRY**

**ILLINOIS CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
September 2023**

## **FINAL REPORT TO THE ASSOCIATION COUNCIL Outdoor Ministry High Performance Team**

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The Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ is blessed to have a long-standing relationship with their two Outdoor Ministry camps: Tower Hill of Sawyer, Michigan (est. 1923) and Pilgrim Park of Princeton, Illinois (est. 1946). These two camps continue to offer ministry opportunities in vast ways to churches, groups, businesses, families, and individuals throughout and beyond the Midwest. Their ministry has been invaluable to tens of thousands of people over the years.

As religious camps throughout our nation are struggling in today's world, the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ decided to perform an in-depth study of their two camps. A High Performance Team (HPT) was created in Spring 2023 to perform the study and submit recommendations to the Association Council in September, as well as the Illinois Conference Assembly in November.

### **HPT OBJECTIVES**

The Outdoor Ministry High Performance Team (ODM-HPT) was created to explore the feasibility and sustainability of the Illinois Conference Outdoor Ministry camps. Their final goal was to provide recommendations toward the future of the camps.

### **HPT MEMBERS**

Members of the ODM-HPT were appointed by the Conference Minister, Rev. Molly Carlson, and consisted of four individuals from within the Illinois Conference, as well as one member from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- Deb Eisfeller - United Church of Byron
- Tim Landry - First Congregational Church, Glen Ellyn
- GC Middleton - Church of the Good Shepherd
- Rev. Thom Parrott-Sheffer (HPT Moderator) – Retired Illinois Conference UCC Pastor, Association Council Member, Outdoor Ministries Committee Moderator
- Rev. Dr. Mike Selburg – Pastor, The First Presbyterian Church of Morrison, IL (PC(U.S.A.))

### **INTENDED PROCESS OF THE HPT**

The ODM-HPT, in consultation with the Illinois Conference Council, laid out an assessment process which included the following:

- a review of the financial and utilization history of Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park camps
- a review of previous Strategic Planning Reports from 2014 and 2020
- interviews with camp directors at each location
- interviews with select ministry leaders from within the Illinois Conference
- interviews with other camp offices in neighboring states

### **PROCESS IMPLEMENTATION – ROADBLOCKS – FINAL THOUGHTS**

The HPT conducted three productive Zoom meetings in April and May. Yet the following two meetings scheduled in June were attended by only Thom and Mike. With the lack of response from the majority of its members, the HPT was essentially defunct by the end of June.

Frustrated, Thom investigated aspects of the intended process on his own and created the first draft of this report. Receiving the draft in early September, Mike asked if he could offer insights regarding his background in working with Stronghold Camp and Retreat Center through Blackhawk Presbytery, and the knowledge he gleaned on camps becoming 501(c)(3) organizations, which would be helpful for those in the Illinois Conference contemplating this as a possibility for their two camps. This had been a topic of conversation at our three meetings in April and May. Thom and Mike decided that this would be the submitted report.

The following report is a combination of Thom's background work and history with Outdoor Ministries, and Mike's past experience facilitating the calculated fiscal separation between the Blackhawk Presbytery and their affiliated camp.

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# **OUTDOOR MINISTRY HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM FINAL REPORT**

The following report consists of information initially discussed by the full Outdoor Ministries High Performance Team yet is ultimately comprised of the work by Thom Parrott-Sheffer and Mike Selburg. Divided into two parts, each author delves into specific areas of knowledge and expertise.

Part I – Thom shares insights about Illinois Outdoor Ministries and its relationship among the Illinois Conference gleaned from his research over the summer. He identifies significant issues and explores perspectives of the Illinois Conference and Outdoor Ministries.

Part II – Mike explores the possibility of Tower Hill and Pilgram Park transitioning to become their own 501(c)(3) organizations. He shares information about the trend of why more religious affiliated camps are becoming 501(c)(3) organizations and the rationale as to why Pilgram Park and Tower Hill should be two separate organizations, if this is indeed the path the Illinois Conference chooses to pursue.

Final recommendations and future steps conclude the report from the Outdoor Ministries High Performance Team.

IMPORTANT NOTE to the Association Council: This limited study lacked any significant conversation with the directors of Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill camps. They were not asked their opinions on the future of the camps in which they have dedicated their careers to serve. Both Mitch Kloster, Director of Pilgram Park, and Tracy Heilman, Director of Tower Hill, understand their organizations better than any committee will be able to glean and it is essential they are an integral part of all conversations regarding the future of the camps.

It is our ultimate recommendation that, by no means, should plans be devised and developed without involvement from both Mitch and Tracy.

## Background of Report Authors:

Rev. Thom Parrott-Sheffer is a retired UCC pastor in the Illinois Conference and has been long involved with Outdoor Ministries. Thom likely knows these camps better than anyone in the Illinois Conference, outside of the Outdoor Ministry staff. He currently serves on the Illinois Conference Association Council and is the Moderator of the Illinois Conference Outdoor Ministries Committee.

Rev. Dr. Mike Selburg is the pastor at the First Presbyterian Church of Morrison, IL (PC(U.S.A.)), and has a decades long relationship with both camps – Pilgrim Park, since 1985 and Tower Hill, since 2000. He has led Blackhawk Presbytery through an extensive review and transformation process for Stronghold Camp & Retreat Center. In addition to his degrees from McCormick Theological Seminary, he holds a B.S. in Industrial Engineering from Northwestern University.

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## ***PART I: ILLINOIS OUTDOOR MINISTRIES AND ITS RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE ILLINOIS CONFERENCE***

## **SIGNIFICANT ISSUES IDENTIFIED**

### **1. Institutional Fatigue**

Camps have been a major topic of discussion within the Illinois Conference for over 20 years. Over time, this discussion has led to greater division within the Conference. Many people love the camps, and others find them a financial burden and/or a relic of the past.

This long-term discussion has created institutional fatigue, which has led to:

- Entrenchment within preexisting opinions, which have become invulnerable to new information
- A blurring of the lines between past glories, present concerns, and prospects
- Attitudes of “change doesn’t apply to me” and “we should be able to do what we have always done”
- Opinions vary about the camps. It is difficult to get the pulse of the Illinois Conference’s population about their connection and feelings of the camps. People are reluctant to be interviewed, don’t return calls or emails, or slide off into tangents or remembering what camping was like when they were young.

### **2. Financial Health**

The camps have diligently been working on the financial issues over the past several years. They have made great strides toward moving to a balanced budget and operating in the black. However, in 2020 they had to face the impact of the Covid pandemic, which reduced the camp usage to below budgetary needs, except the cottages at Tower Hill. Since the camps reopened fully from Covid shutdown, both camps have made great strides in bringing campers back to the properties. However, financial health is still a major issue for the camps.

- Tower Hill has updated and added to its property.
- Historically the Illinois Conference and Camp leadership have either delayed camp renovation or settled for less costly repairs. This is beginning to catch up with the present state of the camps.
- The camps have begun a marketing push, with regular blurbs, invitations, and update about the camps. They are working to keep the camps in the minds and hearts of the Conference.
- The camp directors have been working hard to bring in new grants, increase camp usage, retain returning visitors, and expand camp awareness to the public.
- It is a little-known fact that the camps have a mandate to operate financially independent from the Conference, only sharing overseeing by FAB and Conference Council. Whenever the Conference loaned money to the camps (usually due to the seasonal ebb and flow of camp income) the camps were expected to pay the Conference back. The camps have historically done that.

### **3. Camp Utilization**

Both camps have had several years of steady or small growth of site usage, until 2020. The Covid pandemic, which could not be planned for, created 2-3 years of major reduction in usage. Both camps are seeing a return of campers since reopening from the pandemic shutdown. However, camp usage is still not at capacity.

- A study of Illinois Conference churches patterns of usage could be a good thing. Why are local UCC Churches not using camps as they once had?

- UCC Camp Programs have a long history of proprietary usage, which means that the camps operate below capacity. This needs to be addressed.
- A visioning process to determine how camps are integrated into the life and mission of the Illinois Conference (as well as other Church bodies and public) could be helpful in developing camp programming and increasing camp usage.

#### **4. Camp Infrastructure**

The camps have historically delayed development or made minimal repairs and the lowest cost and lowest levels to keep things running. This creates a ticking time bomb which eventually becomes a major issue.

- Even as the above appears to be true, there has been some significant infrastructure work done at both camps. The addition of cottages and small housing at Tower Hill is one example.
- The maintenance of camps is very dependent on gifts, grants, fundraising efforts, and loans from the Conference.
- The question is raised concerning the modernization of the camps. Tower Hill is ahead of Pilgrim Park in this endeavor.

#### **5. Relationship of the camps to the Conference**

The relationship between the Camps and Conference has a long history which has shined in good times and been a struggle in tough times. This relationship is, of course, always changing from decade to decade, from abundance to scarcity, from relevancy to confusion. Over the years the place of the camps (and camping) has struggled within the mission of the Illinois Conference.

- From the first conversations, the team members agreed that the camps breaking off as their own non-for profit is the norm for camps in today's age. In part, it removes the liability away from the synod while also removes the synod from being a liability for the camps. Further, this continues the expectation that the camps are more strongly independent and in control of their own destiny.
- It is important to maintain a relationship between the Conference and camps, including some intentionality concerning financial support.
- There are competing visions of camping: a vital piece of the Conference's mission, an opportunity for spiritual formation, a financial asset, and an albatross hanging on the future of the Conference.
- Selling the camps would supply a temporary financial gain to the Conference, but at what cost?
- Can a new relationship between the Illinois Conference and the two camps be formed?

### **PERPSECTIVES of the Illinois Conference and Outdoor Ministries**

Recognize the relationship between the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ and Illinois Outdoor Ministries is a bigger issue than just camping and our camps.

As is clear by this report, the issues we were called to address quickly derailed. When you add to that, the recent struggles within the Illinois Conference over finances, local church relationships, and the growing divisions within our society (and so our churches) we can see that these issues become mired in other issues, emotionalism, history, vision, and the cyclical change/reformation which the Church is experiencing today.

- This work cannot be done isolated from the other work being done.
- Let us state again – The Illinois Conference –UCC needs to faithfully answer the question of how camping/camps help fulfill the very nature of Church.
- There needs to be greater linkage and understanding by the people who are the Conference, of how we live out and develop our spirituality, how we invite others into our midst for praise, conversation, and justice, and we become one body of many members (who often do not live, think, or even pray the same way).

Let us be clear: this is NOT the full report we were hoping to deliver. However, it is the best one we can deliver given the circumstances of the process.

With that said, we believe in this report. The recommendations are solid, and based on enough input to be realistic, albeit challenging. It will dramatically change the way camps are run, financed, and grown. However, it should not change the need for a strong relationship between the Conference, the churches, the clergy, and the camps.

It is our desire and hope that our camps become stronger under a more streamlined structure and a stronger sense of mutual mission. In fact, it is foreseeable that we might add a third camp in the future, so that we can have a camp presence south of Peoria. That would be exciting.

## ***PART II: 501(c)(3) CAMP ORGANIZATIONS***

There are many advantages of Pilgram Park and Tower Hill becoming 501(c)(3) organizations and we believe that if this path is chosen, the best future for the camps is to exist independently, each as their own organization. To help the Illinois Conference determine if both camps becoming their own 501(c)(3) organizations is the best solution, this sections provides insight into:

- 1) Why camps are becoming independent organizations
- 2) Rationale as to why the camps should each be their own organization, and not lumped into one
- 3)

### **WHY CAMPS ARE BECOMING INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATIONS**

Over the past two decades, throughout the United States, religious-affiliated camps have begun separating from the governing bodies of their religious organizations. For instance, the Wisconsin Conference of the UCC has done this with their Outdoor Ministries camps and chose to bundle them all into one 501(c)(3) organization. Stronghold Camp & Retreat Center within the Blackhawk Presbytery became their own organization as well. Some of the benefits of this structure include:

- Liability
  - Camps are technically an asset of their governing bodies. Governing bodies can then be a liability to the camps. For instance, if a lawsuit is brought against the governing body, the camps can be used to tabulate the net worth of the organization and possibly be sold off to pay the debt.

This happened to the Chicago Presbytery's camp in Saugatuck, MI. A lawsuit was brought against the Presbytery due to the illegal actions of a presbytery employee, who was not associated with the camp. The Chicago Presbytery lost the lawsuit, and the camp was sold to pay the fine.

- Camps are liabilities to governing bodies. Governing bodies are held responsible for any events or activities taking place at the camps, the actions of employees and staff, as well as holding and covering insurance for all property, vehicles, etc. owned by the camp.
- Separating camps from governing bodies protects each entity financially and legally from one another but does not necessarily sever all working relationships.
- Following the formal separation of a camp from the governing body, if in the future a camp must close, the governing body who previously owned the camp(s) is not necessarily held accountable for the disposal of the property. However, in some instances, the property could be given back to the governing body.  
This is the case with the contract between Blackhawk Presbytery and Stronghold Camp & Retreat Center. In this instance, the governing body can then choose the fate of the property and, if sold, would gain income from the sale of the property.
- Better governance
  - Traditionally, camps have been run by on-site staff and connected to their governing body by a committee or advisory group. Usually, this committee would have no real power over the operation of the camps, and camps were able to float about at their own free will. If either one of these entities is weak (i.e. poor camp staff leadership or a committee of followers), then there is no accountability.
  - Under the structure of a 501(c)(3), a Board of Directors must be formed to manage . This Board would work directly with the staff, advising and directing the overall operation of the organization. The Board would have the ability to hire and fire, make shifts in the operational structure
  - Camps traditionally have had little to no accountability. Creating a Board of Directors builds that accountability into the structure of the organization.
  - Camps are traditionally managed by the head of staff of the governing body, such as the Council Minister of the Illinois Conference. Yet it is typical that the head of staff for the governing body is distantly associated with the camp and does not have the time, experience, or desire to manage a camp or camp staff. A Board of Directors removes the management away from the governing body, freeing up time and energy from the head of staff, and places the management in the hands of both the Board and the camp staff.
  - (Too words.... and really seems like common sense to me, so not sure why this needs to be explained....) Camps who are tethered to a governing body are usually financially dependent on the governing body. By separating camps from governing bodies, camps must become self-sufficient. However, it is a standard practice that the governing body will work with the camps to help them set up a timeline to wean them off financially,



though often the governing bodies indefinitely contribute budgeted financial annual support. As the relationships are not severed between the camps and the governing bodies, the governing bodies typically continue to support the camps with mission money and, in the case of a denomination, continue to promote churches to financially support the camps, as well as promote the programming at the camps. In this separation, it also helps the governing bodies financially. Among the religious governing bodies throughout our country, there is a continued decline in membership, and in such, in financial giving. Camps who are overly dependent on the governing bodies are continuing to need money that is becoming less available, or possibly no longer available from the governing bodies.

- Freedom to grow
  - Camps tethered to governing bodies often feel confined, as they are tethered to old traditions, governing strains, and slow. By becoming independent, camps are unhindered and able to work with their Board of Directors to vision and plan for their future. They can more freely switch up their staffing model, experiment with new programming, and explore possibilities of how to survive and thrive in a very changing world in which the popularity of camps is ever-diminishing.
  
- Potentially greater ability to receive grants
  - Many grants have restrictions tied to religious affiliated organizations. Moving to a stand-alone 501(c)(3) organization opens up the possibility to more funding options.

### **RATIONALE FOR TWO ORGANIZATIONS VS. ONE ORGANIZATION:**

Though there is the potential of making Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park into one sole organization, this concept needs to be discarded. The idea of combining the two into the same non-for-profit organization is similar to expecting that a church in central Illinois should be combined with a church in southwest Michigan with the same council and be considered the same church body. We would never think of doing that, so why would we do that with our camps? Though the Illinois Conference owns two camps right now, it doesn't mean they need to be their own single combined entity. Though this is what the Wisconsin Conference did, they are far more engaged in the life of their camps. For the Illinois Conference to consider simulating the Wisconsin Conference and their Outdoor Ministry camps is not a rational option for the Illinois Conference.

Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park have vastly different needs at this time. They differ in many ways, including: they are in different states, have different directors, different staff, different plans and visions, different clientele, and different potential. They are such different entities that combining them into one organization will hinder both. They need and deserve two separate Board of Directors to help them steer their organizations. They need to be able to be in control of their own destinies and not be reliant on one another.

Each camp needs to focus on their own self. They need their own Board of Directors to help them with this. They must not be forced to take on the other's burdens. However, Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park can still share a common bond and stay in a relationship with one another. They can even share staff when

needed. There is still space for them to have a symbiotic relationship. But they each get to be their own entity responsible for their own self.

Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park need to remain thought of as the camps of the IL Conference. They rely on the churches for much of their income. The churches rely on the camps for their spiritual wellbeing and development. They are still ministry outlets for the churches. It is important to maintain these relationships, despite that they are their own entities. The camps offer an important ministry to the churches and can continue to do so as their own organizations.

It is too much of a liability for either camp to be connected to one another. We must recognize that if we combine Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park into one entity, then one is liable for the actions of the other. This is dangerous and imprudent.

We can come up with other reasons to support the separation of Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park into two separate 501(c)(3) organizations, yet what is stated above contains enough reasons to split the two into their own organizations.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 501(c)(3) PLAN**

We believe the ministries of Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill have bright futures and should be allowed to develop and grow into the future. The time has not yet come to consider closing them. *If* the Illinois Conference chooses to pursue the concept of transitioning their Outdoor Ministries camps into non-for-profit organizations, we recommend the following:

- 1) Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill each become their own 501(c)(3) organizations. They would split off separately and have no legal or financial affiliation with one another, or the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ.
- 2) Create a new committee to oversee and implement the transition process. This committee must include both directors from Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill, as well as a lawyer (who is willing to volunteer the time). This committee would also be in charge of creating the new Boards of Directors for the two camps.
- 3) Create two separate Boards of Directors for Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill. The two Boards of Directors could take over from the initial committee (see step 2) at a point in this process when the committee deems it the appropriate time. It is likely that the Boards will be created early in the process to oversee the majority of the process to transition the camps. Much of the work that needs to be done to create them into their own entities can be performed simultaneously, which will save time, energy and money. The lawyer and camp directors need to remain part of this process.
- 4) The Boards, working with the camp directors, will create realistic milestones for each camp to meet as they separate from the Conference. The Boards will report back to the Association Council in this process until the separation is complete.
- 5) Pilgrim Park and Tower Hill would continue to seek to keep a close relationship with the Illinois Conference. They both appreciate their history with the UCC and want to remain connected to

the churches within the Conference, and likewise, the churches would like to remain close with the camps. The Illinois Conference would still be able to take part in camp programming and look at these two organizations as *their* camps.

We do caution that there is a due process for this transition, and it should be done without undue haste and undue delay. The Conference must remain mindful that if they seek to transition to the camps becoming their own organizations, there is potential to harm the camps which could be difficult to overcome, and/or lead to the premature death of one/both camps. To ensure the desired outcome of structurally sound and financially stable organizations, a robust transition plan must be in place, including a detailed timeline with solid milestones for progression, clearly defined roles and allocation of resources, as well as a communication strategy to connect the camps and the Conference throughout the process.

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## ***FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS***

We do not believe we have done prudent work to offer any final recommendation that should be taken at face value. More work needs to be done to address the issues stated in the intended process of the HPT.

We suggest one the following two:

- Create a new HPT with the same goals but new members and try it again. They can use this document to help them start.

OR

- Create a committee to explore making Tower Hill and Pilgrim Park their own 501(c)(3) organizations and bring this back to the Association Council. If this process is chosen, this committee will establish two Board of Directors and help begin the process to create these organizations, handing over the work to the Board of Directors when they are established.

If the 2<sup>nd</sup> option is chosen, the camps would continue their relationship with the Illinois Conference—UCC. To fully pursue this possibility, the Illinois Conference—UCC needs to investigate how they can maintain their relationships with the camps and continue to utilize them for the ministry of their own churches.

We also urge that this committee must include Tower Hill Camp Director Tracy Heilman, Pilgram Park Camp Director Mitch Kloster, as well as a lawyer who would be willing to volunteer their time.