

Addendum #10 – VT Task Force On Camping/Retreat and Outdoor Ministries (VTTF)

by TASK FORCE MEMBERS: Brigid Farrell, Vermont DS; Yunki Kim, Clergy in Montpelier, VT Jenn Becker Carpenter, CRM Rep. & Director at Aldersgate; Norman Thombs, CRM Rep., Director at Mechuwana; Hannah K. Rogers, Clergy in Rutland, VT

2016 Annual Conference Report

OPENING PRAYER: God, who welcomes us here today; guide us in this time. Help us remember that it is you who invites us to partake in this your church and not the other way around. Help us to hear your Spirit's leading. For this we pray in Jesus' name. AMEN.

Last June, this body voted to form a Vermont Task Force on Camping/Retreat Ministries to tackle three things:

- 1.) Recommendation for use of the Covenant Hills site for 2016
- 2.) Long term recommendations for the Covenant Hills site
- 3.) To assess and sculpt a strategic plan for Youth ministries in Vermont

Over the course of the last year, our committee has met in skype-like meetings each month. Cloaked in prayer, in the spirit of grace, and with open hearts, we have discussed in depth the three tasks we were given and bring 3 recommendations before this body today.

Before we share our results of our discernment and the three recommendations we are making to the Annual Conference regarding the future of Covenant Hills, there are some things which are vital for this body to hear:

First, we wish to acknowledge that this isn't an easy conversation. We know so many of you have experienced deep pain over the decision to suspend programming at Covenant Hills in 2016. We also know that the pain which we experienced as a body while discussing this at last year's Annual Conference still reverberates within this body. We recognize that there are some for whom any repair of these wounds is and will be difficult.

Yet, amidst the knowledge and claiming of this, we also proclaim that we are a people of grace, grace which is bigger than our hurt, our mistrust, and our anger. And, as our Book of Discipline states, (Section V. Church Membership, ¶219, p. 223, 'Mutual Responsibility'), we affirm that we are a people who are, "Willing to confront conflict," so that we might love more perfectly, and be united in closer harmony through the Holy Spirit. We as a committee trust the present and future ministry of Covenant Hills to the beautifying and perfecting Grace of God! We believe that God has a plan, that relationships will be healed, and that there will be a new creation that not one of us can fully comprehend yet.

With these truths in mind, we want to now share with you several things this task force discerned over this last year, after working with the former Board of Directors/Site Committee for Covenant Hills and the Conference Trustees.

Our first recommendation is that Covenant Hills be transformed from a UMC Conference Camp site which plans, administers, and finances a Camping Ministry program for children and youth to something new. We are excited to be on a new path, led by the Holy Spirit.

After an assessment by qualified task force member of the physical property and structures therein, we feel the property as a whole is suitable for the revisioning of new ministries. For the most part, the buildings on the property are structurally sound and we see them as assets for new ministries.

Our second recommendation to the body is that Congregational Development be brought in to consult and work with a new task force, as yet to be formed, to continue this visioning. Ideas already proposed include an agricultural ministry center, Simple Church #2, a New Monastic community, and a revitalization of local church retreat-type ministries. These ideas are just the tip of the iceberg! Whatever God has in store, we have heard God clearly urging us to retain ownership of the property called Covenant Hills Christian Camp and to dream beyond boxes and steeples to discover where God is calling us in this new ministry venture for Covenant Hills.

Our third recommendation to the Body is that a separate task force be formed to address, support, and grow new Youth & Outdoor Ministries program in Vermont that is not tied to a geographic location, but instead a commitment to supporting local churches in doing the work of children's and youth ministry year round. With less than a year to address our many mandates, we were unable to construct such a ministry and believe it was a bigger task than we could tackle in that time period. However, we were successful in creating a system of financial scholarship and support to ensure all Vermont campers can attend any UMC camp in New England, with financial support to pay for camp fees, supplies, transportation, and physical fees. Additionally, there are several non-profit and local church retreats booked to utilize the site with support from this committee, the Conference Trustees, and volunteers throughout Vermont.

In closing, we offer this body a word of caution: Beware! If we dare to follow God's lead, we will surely never be the same again. So, look out! God is doing something new, for, as Isaiah declared, God will bring forth a spring of living water within the desert of our fear, our anger, and our grief. Hold on, for the Holy Spirit is on the move, coming to and fro like the wind, breaking into the institution of the Church and setting us free to BE the Church. As this exciting new adventure continues to unfold, we ask that you will be partners with us in prayer. For, we have work to do, Church; God's work. The time has come, and is already here this day.

On behalf of this committee, thank you for your attention and your grace.

(This report is published in the 2016 New England Conference Journal, pages 58-60, in the Daily Proceedings section.)