

Camping and Retreat Ministries Board Journal Report
Rev. John Hill, Chair of Camping and Ministries Board
Russell Casteel, TWK Executive Director of Camp and Retreat Ministry

There are three amazing United Methodist camping and retreat ministries within our annual conference. Lakeshore Camp and Retreat Center is located in Benton County on the shores of the Tennessee River. It offers summer camp and retreats and other events throughout the year. The Rev. Gary Lawson, Executive Director, and Vickie Lawson, Office Manager, have been on staff for more for decades and are retiring this year. We are so grateful for their leadership and faithfulness over the course of decades in camping and retreat ministries and the Board of Camp and Retreat wish them all the best in retirement! Lakeshore separately incorporated several years ago and is now a Covenant Entity with the TWK Conference. Lakeshore remains a vital partner in camping and retreat ministries within our conference, while existing as a separate entity with their own Board of Directors.

Beersheba Springs Assembly and Cedar Crest Camp are TWK Conference operations. As such finance, HR, and general operations are directly connected to the leadership and work of the Annual Conference. Unlike Lakeshore, Beersheba Springs and Cedar Crest are not separately incorporated; they are entities and ministries of the conference. The TWK Camping and Retreat Ministries Board is tasked with providing oversight and support to these two vital ministries and partnering with covenant entity Lakeshore to create a healthy culture of camp and retreat ministry in our conference.

Following the dual transitions of emerging from a pandemic and the creation of our new conference, the Camping and Retreat Ministries Board reformed following last summer's annual conference. Previously, the Board worked as an advisory board and is now moving into more of a governance and strategic planning role. Since Fall 2023 we have engaged with Kaleidoscope, Inc. to reimagine our role, dream about the future of camping and retreat ministries, and form a strategic plan. A copy of the Kaleidoscope report can be obtained by emailing TWK CRM Executive Director Russell Casteel at russell.casteel@twkumc.org

Some of the key elements from the report from Kaleidoscope are an ambitious but attainable plan to increase the number of people who experience both Beersheba Springs and Cedar Crest, aligning our tuition and fee costs to the market, a goal to more than double fundraising over the next five years, restructuring our Board, and becoming financially sustainable (much less reliant on apportionment dollars). The staff and Board have already begun to implement these plans, and we are excited to see the fruit that will bear over the coming years.

Beersheba Springs Assembly is located in Grundy County on the Cumberland Plateau with a beautiful overlook into a valley, a pre-Civil War era hotel, modern and vintage hotel rooms, and many other amenities. The Assembly is part of the historic town of Beersheba Springs and offers retreats and other events year round. Sarah Ratz has served as the Director since 2017, leading Beersheba to expanding offerings of hospitality, programming, and sabbath. 2023 was a significant bounceback year for ministry at Beersheba Springs, allowing for a return to the mountain. New staff include a Director of Hospitality and Retreat Director, allowing Beersheba to continue being the conference's "front porch"- sabbath, discernment, and transformation. 2024 continues that growth, including new programming and new initiatives; one such being a new playground, part of a grant from United Methodist Camp and Retreat Ministries Association. This year, Beersheba will continue its journey of reformation from the revelation of the site's original owner to slavery and the slave trade. Historical markers, ministry events, and corporate worship are being organized.

Cedar Crest Camp is located on 500 acres of field and forest in Hickman County, less than an hour's drive southwest of Nashville. It is accredited by the American Camping Association and offers summer camp and retreats throughout the year. In addition, Cedar Crest continues to offer an Environmental Education program for schools, colleges, and the greater Middle Tennessee Community. Russell Casteel serves as both the Director of Cedar Crest and the Executive Director of Camping and Retreat Ministries for the TWK Conference. 2023 marked a third straight year of growth in summer camp at Cedar Crest after 2020's cancellation! In addition, the Environmental Education program marked a banner year of groups served. 2024 has continued that growth, and as of the spring camp registrations are 25% ahead of the previous year. A successful conference children's retreat, trail run, and new programming on the horizon outline a successful year ahead for Cedar Crest. Cedar Crest continues to live into

being a “backyard” for our conference, where play and discernment can strengthen our relationship with God and transform our local churches.

Our Conference Camp and Retreat Ministry remains a vital partner in the work of our Conference Children, Youth, Campus Ministry, Older Adults, Creation Care, and Discernment groups. If your church, family, community, covenant entity or group is interested in connecting or learning more, please contact TWK Executive Director of Camp and Retreat Ministry at russell.casteel@twkumc.org.