

Holy Ground: The Power and Influence of Christian Camps and Retreat Centers



Featuring John Knox Ranch of Fischer, Texas



Rob Mueller and
Krin Van Tatenhove



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ROB MUELLER AND KRIN VAN TATENHOVE
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Dedications

“I dedicate this book to my wife, Beth, for the vision she cast and the life she poured into making John Knox Ranch what it is.”

-Rob Mueller, January 2022

Dedicated to my wife, Donna, who has been my dear companion on countless retreats into God's country.

-Krin Van Tatenhove, January 2022

We also dedicate every penny of profit from the sale of this book to provide scholarships for children and youth who cannot afford to go to John Knox Ranch. Each year, JKR welcomes children and youth to summer camp who need financial assistance to pay the fee for their camp session. Transformative camp experiences are not reserved only for those who can afford it. The JKR Summer Camp Scholarship Fund helps ensure that *all* kids have a place at camp. To learn more or make your own donation visit johnknoxranch.org.

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Acknowledgments

“It takes a village...”

Many thanks to each and every one of the folks who were willing to share their stories, photos, testimonies, experiences, and learnings from their encounters with the Holy Ground and Beloved Community of camp. This book is far richer because of your generous sharing!

Special thanks to Henry Owen, current Director of John Knox Ranch, for access to archival photos and historic documents which afford us a visual glimpse into the joy and beauty of JKR and its programs. Particular acknowledgement is also due to the Summer Camp Media Directors: Ian Mellor-Crummey and Madison Wallace for their striking photographs.

Finally, we are deeply indebted to Penni Askew, owner of Word Summit Editing, for her gracious gift of editorial assistance.

Foreword

Camping is a good thing. It's not just healthy for children to experience the great outdoors, get some exercise and surely get some sunburn, meet some cool counselors who may become role models for them, and challenge themselves physically in ways that most 21st-century living situations cannot offer.

Camping *ministry* is a better thing. All five senses are utilized to connect campers to God, in ways tangible and spiritual. They learn what it means to live together in a community: to eat together, sing together, play together, worship together, sometimes fight together, explore together. They learn to break bread and share around a table. They learn that conflicts are a feature of life together, not an exception, and that they can be overcome. They encounter the living God through each other and through the life of their cabin community. Encounters can become practices, shaped over the span of a week or more, that can enrich and deepen a camper's life forever.

What makes my heart sing, what makes the Church's heart sing, is when alumni of camp ministry become *leaders and teachers*, those who enable the next generation to catch the vision. One can go from being a camper to a junior camp counselor to one who helps plan the camping events. Then campers may find that they are attending the national Youth Triennium or even college with their campmates from years ago. Some of those campers, after attending seminary, will come back to serve as chaplains for the summer session. And if you're lucky, like me, one day you will have not one but TWO such "former campers" (if there is such a thing as a "former" camper) on your presbytery staff. Working with adults who have been nurtured by the very ministry you offer is a delight. It is such a blessing to be able to see the full circle of ministry. And our congregations are blessed by leaders who are using their

energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to share the gifts that they were long since given.

I commend to you this gift from Krin and Rob, in which they share with you the vision for what camping ministry can be. It's more than just a way to get your kids out of the house during the summer; it's a subversive way to change the world.

Sallie Sampsell Watson
General Presbyter, Mission Presbytery

January, 2022

Introduction

*If you have a sacred place...take advantage of it,
something will happen. – Joseph Campbell*

*Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy
ground. – Exodus 3:5*

Holy ground. Places imbued with a special meaning that draw us into deeper realms of experience.

Human beings have always been inspired by this connectedness. The Tohono O'odham tribe of Southwest Native Americans translates as Desert People. The Tewa Pueblo word *navahu'u*, meaning “farm fields in the valley,” later became our English term Navajo. Aloha 'Āina (love of the land) is a core value of the aboriginal people of Hawaii. It carried over to the state’s motto: *The life of the land perpetuates in righteousness*. The Hebrew name for the first human, Adam, comes from *adamah*, meaning ground, an ancient reminder that we rise from the earth and must protect it for future generations.

What does holy ground mean to you? In our previous collaboration, *Neighborhood Church: Transforming Your Congregation into a Powerhouse for Mission*, we began one of the chapters like this:

Think of a place that has a powerful hold on you. It may be a family homestead, a setting in nature, or a venue in your city where you spend quality time. These locations evoke more than memories; they stir our spirits and connect us with memories of times past. They help us incarnate in the real world, however fleeting. Cultures since the beginning of recorded history have valued

“power spots” or “thin places,” locales where the veil between the temporal and eternal seems to dissolve. Though we can open the doors of perception to God’s presence anytime, anywhere, we still love to take pilgrimages to these places, reveling in their beauty.¹

For many people, this pilgrimage leads them to camps and conference centers encountered through their churches. Both children and adults find abundant blessings in these “places apart.” In this book, we will explore how these places connect us with Creation, strengthen our bonds within the human family, and even spark new vocations. We will illustrate this through the testimonies of people at three Texas facilities, centering primarily on John Knox Ranch (JKR) in Fischer, Texas.

We believe that camping ministry, if embraced, continues to play a vital role in the life of Christian denominations. Currently, there are around 3,000 Christian camps and conference centers remaining in the United States. However, their power and purpose has come under threat in recent decades. As many as 2500 camps nationwide went out of business between the 1970s and 1990s.²

A brief history...

After a rough period when its own future hung in the balance, JKR is now experiencing renewal. JKR began on July 10, 1962 with the purchase of the 254-acre Meyer Ranch, culminating a three-year search for a retreat and fellowship site. In 1968, the Presbytery of John Knox (now Mission Presbytery) bought another 46 acres, bringing the property to its current 300 acres. This added several hundred feet of creek frontage,

capturing one of the most beautiful, heavily-wooded areas at the ranch.

Throughout the '60s, '70s and early '80s, JKR operated like most denominational camps, with an on-site care taker as the only year-round staff, and volunteer clergy leading and staffing each week of the Presbytery's camping program. This model worked within its limitations, but it lacked continuity, vision, and the strategic planning necessary for a vital future.

During the late '80s and into the '90s, Mission Presbytery hired the first year-round directors of JKR, Rob and Beth Watson, and this kindled a heyday in its history. There was a new level of professionalism and continuity that increased the number of campers and financial support.

The first decades of the 21st century, however, brought this growth to a halt. Protestant churches nationwide experienced dwindling attendance and budgets, a retraction that had ripple effects across all levels of ministry, including camps and conference centers. JKR's own challenges were compounded by record flooding along the Blanco River that devastated their dining hall and several other facilities.

Fast forward to the present. Henry Owen took over as Executive Director of JKR in late 2019. He comes from a long line of Presbyterians and both he and his wife, Emily, had early experiences that instilled a love for camp ministry and John Knox Ranch. Henry was a camper, and as a teen he participated in the leadership development programs of the Presbytery and JKR. After high school he worked several years on summer staff at the camp.

Henry's career experience includes time as an elementary school teacher and as Executive Director of the Nature

Discovery Center in Houston, Texas, whose mission is to ignite a life-long respect and love for nature.

Speaking of his new role at JKR, Henry says, “A lot of folks say that camp is where they can *really* be themselves. We believe this is an actual occurrence. We try to build a safe place where people can take risks and grow into the individuals God created them to be.

“This can be especially important for children and youth whose parents tend to micromanage their relationships, schoolwork, even emotions. No matter how well-intentioned, this is an attempt to smooth out the rough bumps that *all* of us must face. These are life challenges that teach us necessary coping skills. Each child should be able to face these hurdles and overcome them on their own.

“Here at camp, we spread the responsibility so that everyone pulls their weight. We also challenge campers through our ropes course, where the goal is two-fold. First, it develops each child’s ability to analyze and manage their own risk levels. Second, it requires them to work cooperatively with their group when the task is to get all of them safely from one point to another. These challenges develop soft skills like communication and cooperation that prepare them for real life in any industry, ministry, or relationship they pursue.

“There are few places today where kids will be away from their screens and phones for a whole week. Essentially, we teach them that they don’t really need these devices. Putting them down for a while opens up new levels of awareness. We would like to expand this into some ‘digital detox’ retreats for adults in the future.”

Henry and his team have worked hard to develop strong relationships with local churches in Mission Presbytery, increased fundraising, and engaged in strategic long-term planning that includes an innovative “Conservation easement” outlined in Chapter One. The number of summer campers has almost tripled in the past few years despite the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

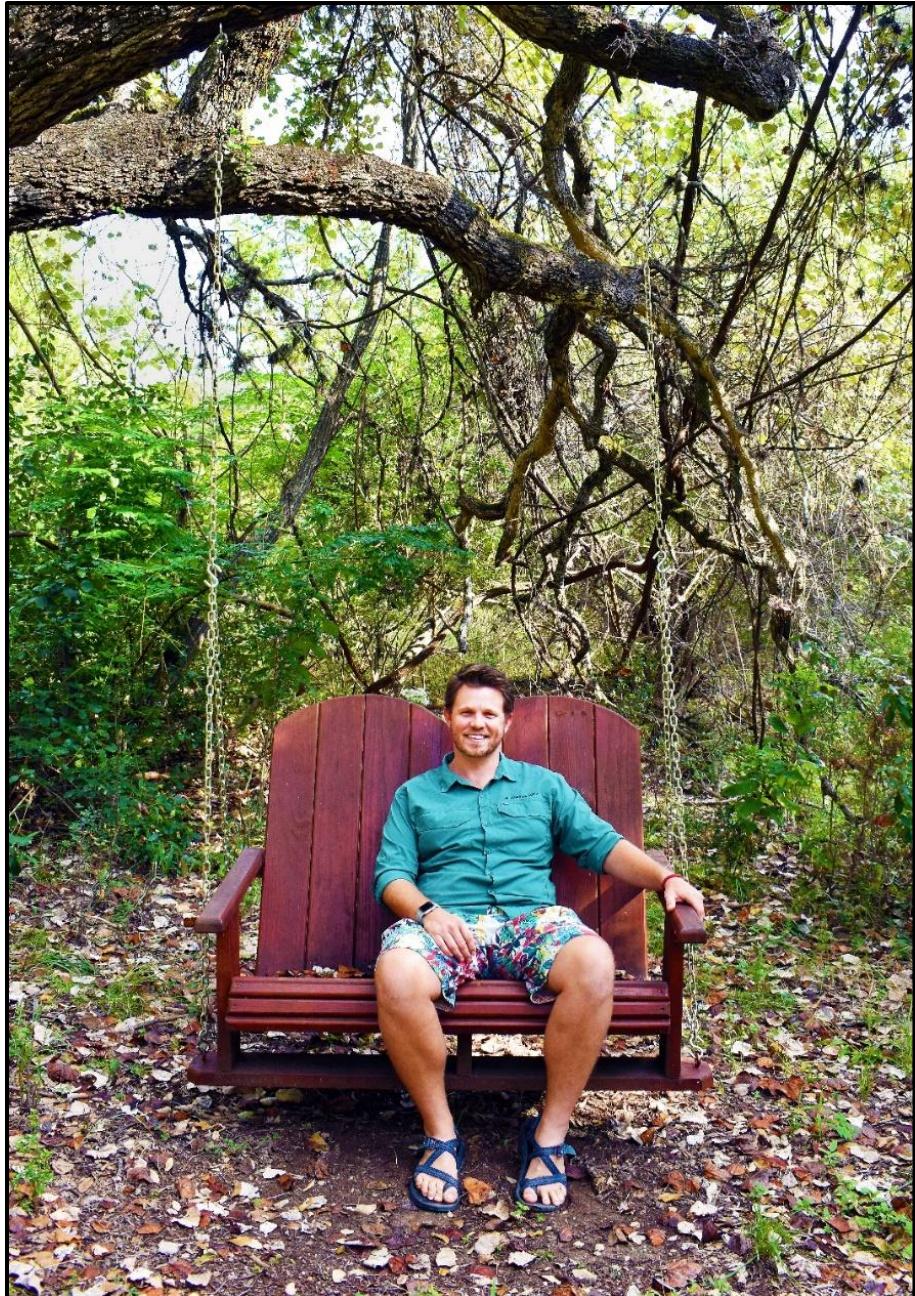
The future is bright for JKR and Henry holds fast to the core reasons for the ranch’s existence, highlighted in this memory.

“As part of our camping weeks, we take each cabin of 12 kids to a remote place on the property to sleep overnight on tarps. For many of them, this is the first time they have ever slept under the stars. Fears of the dark, unknown critters, and strange sounds all combine to increase anxieties. One camper became so afraid and insecure that his counselor called our Program Director, Andy Watson, for assistance.

“By the time Andy arrived, the other campers had managed to settle their cabin mate’s anxieties. They had circled their sleeping bags with his in the middle so that he was surrounded by a wall of friends. They were all peacefully gazing at the heavens and learning the names of constellations.

“I *love* this because it not only points to stargazing as an age-old practice that soothes our minds, but also highlights how the loving support of a community will help us get through the rough patches in our lives.”

Encounters with nature; encounters with a new sense of community. JKR will continue to offer these priceless gifts for generations to come.



**Henry Owen, Executive Director
of John Knox Ranch**

Chapter One: Encountering and Protecting Creation

O Lord, what a variety of things you have made! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. – Psalm 104:24

Be still and know that I am God! – Psalm 46:10

It's an aspect of modern life that we tolerate, even justify-- plugging ourselves into gadgets that distract us and absorb our precious time. We wield our smart phones like extra appendages. We binge watch TV series from our favorite streaming sources. We surf internet newsfeeds that tantalize us with clickbait headlines, then dog us with incessant marketing.

There is no doubt. We have a cultural addiction to technology, sometimes barely aware of its consequences. It underscores the reality that so much of Western civilization has separated itself from the environment. We too often view the natural world as a resource to exploit, conforming it to the contours of our unsustainable notions of progress. Even as evidence of climate change escalates catastrophically, we are slow to alter our consumptive ways.

Losing contact with the natural world, substituting screen images for direct experience, exacts a hefty toll. Environmentalist writer, Richard Louv, coined the term “nature deficit disorder.” He describes what happens when we disconnect ourselves from the natural world, especially as children. Over-protective parents, the loss of green spaces in our neighborhoods, and the ubiquitous lure of electronics all contribute to this malaise. Louv believes that we pay a heavy price for this alienation, including a lack of respect for the land, attention deficit disorder, and depression.

This is surely one of the precious gifts offered by camps and conference centers: a chance to reconnect with the outdoors. Not all these places exist in natural settings; some offer refuge in the middles of cities. But most of them are entry points to undiluted Nature, providing unique chances to encounter Creation in its raw, overwhelming purity.

Obviously, we can encounter God through Creation anytime, anywhere, and a goal of living mindfully each day is to be aware of this Presence. For most of us, however, it is somehow easier in a natural setting. In his book, *Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camps in Theological Perspective*, Jacob Sorenson puts in this way: “The created world is an outpouring of God’s divine love and exists as an expression of God’s joy. Creation is God’s playground...”³

John Knox Ranch is one of these beautiful playgrounds. On its 300 acres, you can find an idyllic creek, the Blue Hole swimming spot, the banks of the Blanco River, forests of juniper and oak, native grasslands, star-filled skies at night. These delights have ushered countless people into a breathtaking experience of Creation. It is akin to the awe David felt when he penned his song known as Psalm 8:

*O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens...
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?*

This connection alone has a deep, organic value that is priceless, stitching us into the fabric of life in a way that seems eternal, focusing an awareness of our existence within God's ecology, cleansing us from stress and our preoccupation with self. Camps and conference centers offer this gift to all of us.

Quality camps recognize that such "mountaintop experiences" amid the glory of Creation need supporting structures to maximize their power to transform us. Knowing this, JKR has developed and integrated intentional environmental components and green practices within its camping programs for children and youth to help them live into habits that reflect a new awareness of our place within the whole.

- Food waste from the dining hall kitchen is vermicomposted with red wiggler worms that eat the scraps and turn them into nutrient rich compost used in the camp garden.
- Participants learn about native plants and animals while canoeing, hiking, and fishing.
- Hands-on learning includes tending a vegetable garden, creating seed balls with native grass seed, selectively thinning Ashe juniper, removing nonnative and/or invasive plants, picking up litter, conserving electricity.

Time in nature also stirs in us a desire to become good stewards of our planet, protecting it for future generations. To this end, JKR has initiated a partnership with the Hill Country Conservancy to create a "conservation easement" with over 200 of its acres. A conservation easement is a recorded written agreement between a landowner and a nonprofit land trust. The property owner makes the decision to allow the land trust to be

the “holder” of the agreement. The owner keeps the legal title to the land and together with the land trust decides which uses should continue on the property and which they want to limit. In essence, the easement is a limit or restriction a landowner freely places on themselves and their property to preserve the natural beauty, fertile soil, wildlife, and history of their land forever. In the case of the proposed JKR conservation easement, JKR would receive financial compensation in return for agreeing to never develop or subdivide the easement land.

Frank Davis is the Chief Conservation Officer at the Hill Country Conservancy. He and their organization first heard of JKR through a board member. It only took one visit for him to fall in love with the place.

He was especially enamored with the ranch’s location on the Blanco River, a stretch of water that has become highly developed, its water quality threatened. He marveled at the 20-foot-deep, spring-fed Blue Hole, and its lovely subsidiary, Carper’s Creek.

“JKR is somewhat off the radar because of being a summer camp,” he says, but it’s like a flashback in time. It shows what the Hill Country used to look like and how it can remain 150 years from now if we are good stewards.

“With 95% of Texas being privately owned, most of us don’t get to witness the wonders that are behind closed gates, just over a hill, or beyond a grove of cedar trees. JKR immerses people in these wonders of God’s majesty and glory.

“I almost felt jealous,” he says with a chuckle. “I thought ‘I wish I had been exposed to this place when I was young!’”

Now, listen to the words of a few people who have found new awareness, purpose, and joy amidst the natural beauty of camps and conference centers.

Mo-Ranch

(While many camps are struggling to survive, Presbyterian Mo-Ranch Assembly is thriving. Purchased by the Presbyterian Synod of Texas in 1949, its original size decreased with a sale of 6,500 acres to the State of Texas for the establishment of the Kerr Wildlife Management Area. Now, nestled on 500-acres along the spring-fed Guadalupe in the heart of the Texas Hill Country, it is a popular place for spiritual retreats, conferences, summer and day camps, weddings, reunions, group meetings, and corporate retreats.)

“If this is like heaven, it is where I want to be.”

For decades, the women of Divine Redeemer (DR) Presbyterian Church in San Antonio have gathered for the Hispanic Women’s Conference at Mo-Ranch.

Graciela (Grace) Martinez, a long-time member of DR, says “Whether we are down by the river or standing next to that cross on the hill, it’s a sanctuary, a place where we can share our deepest thoughts, pains, fears and angers. How can you not believe in God when you see the majesty of God’s work?”

Grace came to the United States as an immigrant from Mexico. Her mother worked hard to help her children become legal residents, especially so that they could attend public schooling. “This country has given me so much,” she says, “and I believe God bestows blessings on us so that we can be a blessing to others.”

Grace and the women of DR have indeed found a powerful way to live out this calling. They know that many

women in their West Side neighborhood raise children on poverty incomes, often in humble homes without air conditioning during hot summers. Others have suffered physical and emotional abuse at the hands of the men in their lives. Enjoying time away in the Texas Hill Country is beyond their imaginations.

The women of DR devised a simple plan. They would provide invitations and scholarships for these women to join them at the Mo-Ranch conferences.

“The first year,” says Grace, “we took 16 women from the neighborhood, and recently we took 23. In our times of sharing and mutually blessing each other, we have been amazed at how eloquently these women express themselves. And it is so moving to see how they responded to the beauty of Mo-Ranch.



I remember a woman hugging a tree. Others gathered stones or small items to take home as mementoes. One woman summed it up perfectly, ‘If this is like heaven, it is where I want to be.’

An outgrowth of this effort is a Monday morning *Desayuno y Discipulado*—a Bible study, support group, and sharing of food. Many of the women who have visited Mo-

Ranch are there. The group gathers an offering each time, money that support scholarships for future visits to Mo-Ranch.

Grace finds a deep purpose in this ministry.

“We DR women come back from each retreat feeling inspired by communion with others and God’s Creation,” she says. “We are even more motivated to have our neighbors join us at this special place called Mo-Ranch.”

“A lifelong place of spiritual connections.”

Jane Anne Mannock teaches psychology and government at St. Mary’s Hall, an independent school in San Antonio, Texas. However, her influence on young people extends far beyond her classroom, especially when it comes to introducing them to nature. She has been certified through Scouting, the Red Cross, and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, which instills self-improvement skills to youth in a wide variety of settings and disciplines.



“My mother took me to Port Aransas when I was three months old,” she says with a chuckle, “and I swear I must have gotten salt water in my veins. I have *always* loved being near the ocean. For me, it is soul restoring.

Jane’s passion for the outdoors arises from her natural curiosity, but it also stems from some early camp experiences. She vividly recalls her times at Summer Place, a small Presbyterian camp on the Gulf Coast in Port Aransas, Texas that no longer exists.

“While I was in middle school, I remember going on a family retreat over an Easter weekend. The other kids and I would wander down to the shoreline with a great sense of freedom that is so rare today. We ran our fingers through the sand, collecting shells and sand dollars. There was always this sense of anticipation. What would we find on that day? What would be washed up on the shore?

“In the evenings, we gathered on an upstairs porch to sing and study, and we always had a view of the ocean over the sand dunes.”

Her other camp memories are tied to Mo-Ranch. She attended mid-winter retreats during middle school and high school, became a chaperone later for her daughter, and has been a leader for both Girl and Boy Scout camping trips on the ranch’s property.

“Mo-Ranch is one of the few places that has always felt holy to me,” she says. “It introduced me to a sense of the majesty that surrounds us and my connection to this higher power. It was almost overwhelming at times but being there with others buffered that feeling.

“I loved sunrise services on the hill and the fact that I learned skills like paddling a canoe and how to weather the elements. I returned home feeling that I had accomplished something.”

Passing on this sense of self-sufficiency and wonder is key to Jane’s teachings. She loves those special moments when the world opens up in new ways.

“I remember a moment with a girl scout group on the Mo-Ranch grounds. We were getting set up for cooking the evening meal when a tarantula suddenly walked into our camp. One of the girls saw it and cried out, ‘Oh my God!’ I responded by saying, ‘Wow, that is *so* cool.’ This prompted the girls to look closer at the spider and notice its unique beauty. They even ended up calling him Mo-Jo. I find that moments like that are so delightful. These girls went from a feeling of near panic to an appreciation that made them realize how this creature belonged in that setting.”

“Mo-Ranch,” she says, “has been a lifelong place of spiritual connections that I have not felt anywhere else, including my home church. I have specified in my will that I want my ashes laid to rest in Mo-ranch’s columbarium.

“I want to be looking out over that beautiful sweep of the Guadalupe River.”

Camp Gilmont

(As a place of ministry, Camp Gilmont’s roots run deep to the 1940’s when a few members of the Presbyterian church purchased and set aside 400 acres. It was a place for Paris Presbytery members to enjoy summer camp. On January 1, 1958, Paris Presbytery became part of the Presbytery of Northeast Texas, then later Covenant

Presbytery, and eventually Grace Presbytery. In 1994, Gilmont was ceded by Grace Presbytery to a group of Presbyterian churches in East Texas, many with members who had grown fond of the camp as children. They formed Presbyterian Camps at Gilmont, Inc. a 501(c)(3) Corporation, insuring that Gilmont would continue to be a place of ministry for generations to come.)

“We are part of a much bigger mystery.”

Todd Freeman is pastor of College Hill Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. An avid photographer, he loves to spend time in nature, especially at places like Camp Gilmont (CG). These times away have had a great impact on his life.



“Exploring, experiencing, and simply spending time in nature has made all the difference in my spiritual journey of faith. Much of this began when I was young during Boy Scout

camping trips. Camp and conference centers like CG have also played a very important role, especially in my adult years.

“It was at a retreat, as an adult sponsor, when I discerned God’s call into ordained ministry. It is in and through the beauty and diversity of nature, and all creation itself, where I especially encounter a sense of the Sacred Presence of God. As my own theology began to pivot from a more traditional understanding of God to what many now call a Celtic spirituality, I came to realize that all of creation is made *of* God, not just *by* God. As a result, connecting with God in and through nature, and certainly at camp and retreat encounters, I realize that life is about so much more than ‘self.’ We are part of the much bigger mystery of creation itself, all of it infused with God’s Presence.”

“Wild-learning in nature broadens all horizons immeasurably.”

Marie Nelson, Associate Director at CG, grew up on a farm in the small Texas Panhandle town of Halfway. The outdoors surrounded her as a child and she reveled in it.

“I remember making up a song when I was a girl,” she says with a laugh. “I stood on top of a shed and sang to the pigs and cows, ‘I like living on a farm with nature by my side!’”

Marie has especially warm memories of her father’s clear connection to the environment.

“He was at ease with whatever happened,” she says, “no matter the weather. There was a natural rhythm to his life. I remember him opening the chicken house at dawn, then being out there to close it at sunset with a backdrop of beautiful colors. He didn’t talk a lot, but I held his hand during those years.”

Marie graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in Ag Development. After she married, she and her family moved to Gilmer, a town amid the piney woods of East Texas.

“We were surrounded by a vale of forest,” she says. “I was in awe, taking deep breaths and marveling at how much beauty was there. I also learned that although the forest is green, if you sit for a moment and pay attention, that green has many shades and textures.”

It is this attention to nature’s details that has permeated Marie’s time at CG, where she has been on staff since 2003, serving in a variety of capacities. One of her greatest joys has been to direct the Outdoor School that introduces students from local schools to the beauty of CG. It’s a prime example of utilizing the camp’s resources during times when it might otherwise lie dormant.

“It has always been a struggle,” she says “to convince some educators of the value of outdoor classrooms. They often view it as a field trip, or even free time, but not as a solid academic experience. In today’s public schools, there is so much emphasis on passing tests and studying to standards. But not everyone learns in the same way. Children who may not do well in the classroom begin to thrive in a different landscape, and those who need to be more flexible have that space as well. Wild-learning in nature broadens all horizons immeasurably.”

Marie employs a variety of methods in her outdoor explorations. These include learning to use field guides, dichotomous keys, binoculars, and compasses. This curriculum has also become part of a new summer “eco-camp” that focuses on science and the environment.

One of Marie's primary lessons is that we must always be flexible in natural settings. We never know what learning opportunities will arise in the fluidity of an ecosystem.

"One day," she says, "the lesson was supposed to be centered on forestry. We donned our backpacks, then plotted a particular area, aiming to investigate everything within that quadrant. But as soon as we started, it began to rain. It was a gentle but heavy shower, so we put on our ponchos and watched as the water came down the trail. We observed both its constructive and destructive force as it filled a pond near us. Suddenly, our discussion had changed from forestry to watersheds."

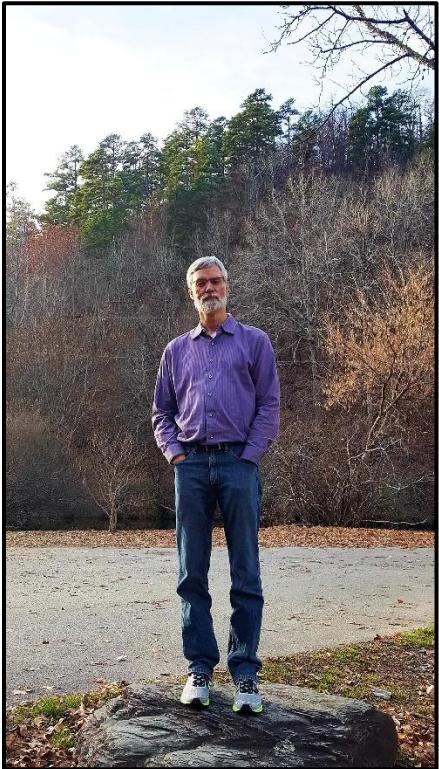
It's all about being present. Marie will often ask her students to sit on mats and just observe with all their senses.

"I tell them to let Brother Gravity hold them in place as they open themselves to what they can see, smell, feel, and hear."

"Come and connect!"

Presbyterian Pastor **Clay Brantley** has ties with CG that stretch back over 30 years. The place has been so seminal in his spiritual journey that he wrote a poem about it which is currently featured on the camp's website.

"When I drive through the entrance gates to the camp," he says, "all those rich experiences from the past surround me. My breathing even seems to change because I am entering sacred ground, a place where I have encountered the Holy so many times. My world, like many others, can get so small as I think too much about myself. Being at Gilmont opens my story to a wider and richer reality."



“Located in East Texas, Gilmont has marvelous trees—tall pines and oaks. There is something about being in their towering presence that always stirs me. I put my hands-on them, sit in front of them, even converse with them.”

Once, while communing with a large pine tree, Clay had a remarkable experience that still refreshes his spirit.

“I was sitting there relating to that tree, taking deep breaths, and I said, ‘Who am I? What are you doing in my life, Christ? Can you give me a bit more of a road map?’

A very clear answer came to me.

‘You are a Lover of Soul and Inviter to the Dance.’ Those were new words for me. I had never considered myself in this capacity. Where did that come from? From God, certainly, but it was in the presence of that tree. Even now I can go back to that spot and reengage in the conversation.”

As a retreat leader at CG, Clay has observed similar epiphanies happening in the lives of others as they embrace nature and share their lives with others more intimately.

“This is *so* affirming,” he says, “because it is not just my experience at Gilmont. It is happening again and again. There is something so special about that place!”

Here is a portion of the piece Clay wrote entitled *Poem for Camp Gilmont*.

*We are in a time of disconnection
from God, from one another, from self, from nature.
More and more of us believe there is no God, no deep connections,
no life-giving gifts from nature we need to receive.
Gilmont is more than a conference center
a place to which we retreat.
It is a critical piece to the survival of our species
to the sanity of our race
to the yearnings of our souls
to the connections with Life Itself.
Gilmont offers us the space to connect,
to live
to love
to be
that we do not find in our normal walks of life.
This we must shout from the hills and lakes and trees of Gilmont.
Come and connect!*

John Knox Ranch

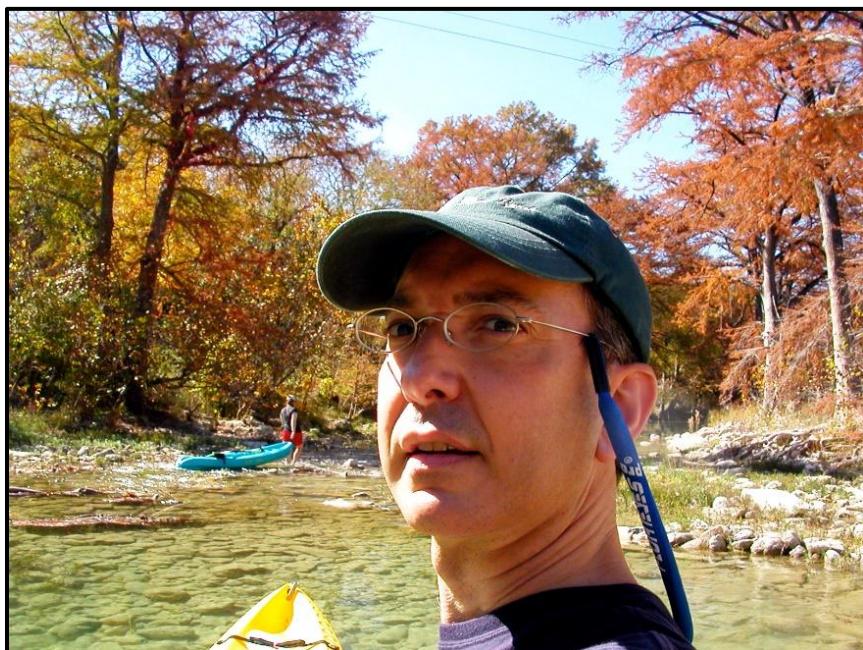
“It humbles us in so many ways.”

Doug Dalglish, a former marine and electrical engineer, has been a Presbyterian pastor for 28 years. Part of his calling is to connect people with God’s presence in Creation, a branch of his own life that is deeply rooted in his childhood.

“As a kid,” he says, “I looked around at trees and bushes but no one knew what they were. Even my science teachers couldn’t tell me the names of the plants just outside our classroom windows. This gave me a hunger to know more about nature.”

Doug has satisfied some of this desire through his experience at JKR, beginning with his first time at camp in the seventh grade. He has many positive memories from those early years, including a canoe trip on the Llano River sponsored by JKR during his senior year in high school.

Since then, throughout his career in South Texas, Doug has found ways to give back to JKR. He served on the Camps and Conference Committee of Mission Presbytery, the regional body that oversees the ranch and its ministry. He became one of the chaperones for JKR's annual backpacking trips, a volunteer gig that lasted 20 years. Since his certification as a Texas Master Naturalist, he has led recruits on work parties aimed at restoring native grass at the ranch.



“In my introductory talk with these volunteers,” he says, “I stress the importance of keeping springs flowing, grassland

healthy, and preserving habitat for as many native species as possible.”

One of his most rewarding efforts at JKR occurred over a decade from the late 90s through early 2000s. The program director at JKR and a retired teacher approached several of the Title 1 schools in San Antonio’s Northeast Independent School District. Their idea was simple. They would bus these inner-city kids to JKR for three days and two nights as part of an environmental education program.

“The science department declined the offer,” Doug says with a chuckle. “It was only the fine arts department that embraced the idea.”

Doug helped develop some of the curriculum for the retreat that was hands-on; no lectures, just direct experience. The arts component came as an assignment for the students to create songs, poems, drawings, and skits around what they encountered, sharing these creations at a campfire.

“Most of these youth had never been outside the city,” says Doug. “I remember them getting off the bus with their cell phones in hand and saying, ‘there’s nothing here!’ Then, after spending days identifying an amazing variety of plants and animals, they came to realize the fullness of what surrounded them.”

“I remember one kid from Mexico who didn’t speak much English. We were walking along a trail when we saw a crested caracara. I began to explain that the golden eagle on the Mexican flag was probably a caracara in the original Aztec myth. The kid began to dispute me, and I admit that, at first, I assumed he didn’t know what he was saying. But as I listened, he explained to me that the original Mexican emblem was

indeed a caracara, but it wasn't the caracara we commonly see in Texas, rather a southern sub-species. So much for my assumptions!

"To me, a lot of the power of camping ministry is in how the natural setting forms community. When we go through hardships together, when we sleep on the ground, when we wake up together and stay up late at night watching the stars, it builds community. This doesn't happen much at church, but at camp it does.

"Honestly, I don't think I would have become a pastor based solely on church experience. Much of what we do in churches is designed to lock God out. We control the images, the temperature, sitting in seats we like with walls surrounding us. Then, in our boxes, we tell the stories we want to tell each other.

"When you go out in nature, all that falls apart. If God wants it to rain, it will rain; or to steam with heat, it will; or to be swarming with mosquitoes, so be it.

"It humbles us in so many ways."

"Everything there speaks to me."

Adriana Netro's exposure to JKR has been while attending retreats with the leadership of Divine Redeemer Presbyterian Church. One experience in particular will stay with her forever. It happened in 2012, just after Victoria, her partner of 11 years, had died of cancer. The disease came on unexpectedly and progressed quickly, stunning both of them.



Soon afterwards, grieving deeply, she was browsing through some greeting cards at the supermarket. One of them had a picture of two nutrias swimming together, and it had an odd effect on her.

“I had recently seen a TV commercial that also featured a nutria swimming on its back. Don’t ask me why, but I felt somehow that my love was speaking to me. I bought the card at the store and kept it like it was a message from her.”

Shortly afterwards, Adriana attended an elder’s retreat at JKR.

What happened next is something dear and personal to her.

“We had a break in our business, so I took a walk down to the pond. I was lonely, filled with a turmoil of feelings, mostly despair. Standing at the edge of the water, I heard a noise, a call, and it sounded like my name. I turned and saw the eyes of a nutria staring up at me from the surface. It’s hard to describe what I felt at that moment. It was *un abrazo*, like God was embracing me, wrapping me in arms of warmth and comfort.

“Grieving is in God’s time, but I can tell you that in that moment both God and my love were telling me, ‘I know how you feel and everything is going to be fine.’ It set me free in a very profound way.

“In Aztec culture, one of their gods was Ometeotl, both male and female and present in all of Creation. This is what I have always felt at JKR. Everything there speaks to me—the water, the trees, the flowers and rocks. I miss that place. I miss the walks. I miss the sounds of the water. But it has taught me a great lesson. Now I am able to enjoy my own backyard more fully with its own set of sights and sounds.

“God’s presence lifts me up wherever I am.”

“It’s OK not to know, and that is so liberating.”

Leo Rios has ties with Divine Redeemer that reach deep into his childhood. It was his family’s home congregation, and even though he lived elsewhere for decades, he reengaged after returning to San Antonio in 2016.

Much of his exposure to JKR has come through involvement with DR’s historic Boy Scout troop, an active presence in its neighborhood since the 1930s. JKR offers a close and convenient way to expose the scouts to the outdoors, so the troop has taken many outings there. As one of the leaders, Leo has overseen work projects such as clearing brush, and has taught the basic outdoors skills of camping, fire building, and cooking in the open air.

“One of the things I love about JKR is that even though it is close to urban San Antonio, when you get there you feel so far from the 9-5 world. I remember taking the scouts on a five-mile hike that ended with them having to build their own shelters. They thought they were 50,000 miles from civilization, but if they had climbed to the top of any nearby hill, they would have seen roads stretching back to the city.

“At JKR, we expose youth to nature in a way most of them have never experienced. One of the things I especially love doing

with them is laying there at night and gazing up at the stars and planets. A dark blue backdrop with all those dots. I remember one of the scouts saying to me, ‘Everything has an end, right? What about space? Where does it end? And if does end, what is beyond it?’

“What could I say? Can any of us fathom eternity or endlessness? When I look at those stars, I don’t have to come up with an answer. I don’t press myself to understand it. It’s OK not to know, and that is so liberating. The very fact that this scout was experiencing a similar sense of awe and wonder gave me a feeling of peaceful satisfaction.

“Every once in a while, I’ll get to church early on a Sunday and just sit in the sanctuary. I liken that feeling to being at JKR. Our minds are like panes of glass. Being in holy places like JKR cleanses our perception and everything becomes crystal clear.

“When you get there, you step out of your usual life and enter another one.”

“It etched the experience on their hearts.”

Rob Watson is currently Director of Camps and Conferences for the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas. He helps oversee the operations of three facilities—two in Texas, one in Colorado. It’s a passion rooted in his childhood experiences at Camp Grady Spruce, a YMCA facility on Possum Kingdom Lake in Graford, Texas.

“It was an all-encompassing immersion,” he says. “We slept on cots in open tents with the wind coming across the water. Those were some of the deepest and most relaxing nights of sleeps I’ve ever had. Even when storms rolled in and got us wet, it was all part of it. I don’t know if I fully appreciated it at

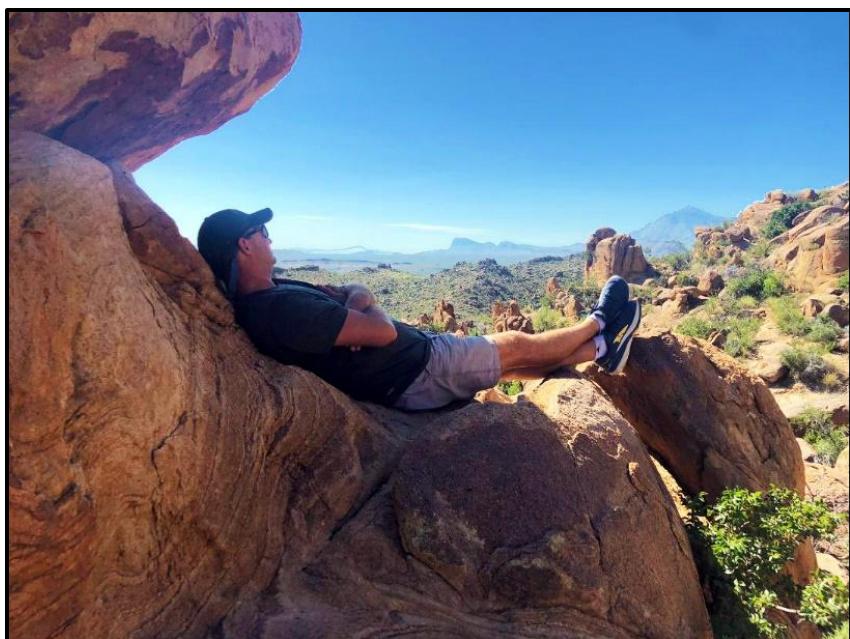
the time, but as I got older, I realized how those experiences introduced me to the outdoors in profound ways.”

Rob eventually became a staff member at Camp Grady Spruce. He has strong memories of laying on the docks at night with his coworkers, looking up at billions of stars.

“It gave me a perspective of both smallness and largeness,” he says. “The magnitude of creation but also the importance of my place in it.”

Rob and his former wife, Beth, directed JKR together from 1989 until 2000. He vividly recalls his initial trip to JKR across Devil’s Backbone, a scenic stretch of highway leading to the ranch.

“The first time I walked onto the property, it was like an awakening,” he says. “Sure, the place had some disrepair, having been managed mostly by volunteers, but I was astounded by its natural beauty. I thought that if people could have the



opportunity to visit John Knox Ranch and witness the beauty first hand, they might leave a changed person.”

Rob and Beth were young and energetic. They spent most of their waking hours brainstorming how they could increase JKR’s visibility. They planned and carried out meaningful programs, raised funds, and promoted summer camp. They added facility structures like a low and high challenge course, a campfire site, primitive camp sites, river swim area, a dining hall and commercial kitchen, modern cabins and an outdoor chapel. Rob has special memories attached to all of them.

At the Blue Hole, he repeatedly saw people who had never swum in natural water. They were timid at first, but when they overcame their fears it was life changing. At the outdoor chapel—which Rob calls the spiritual center of the ranch—he remembers so many times of Spirit-filled worship, including a service punctuated by owls hooting from nearby trees. The memory still gives him chills.

But perhaps his most powerful recollections of those times spent with campers was around the closing campfires that climaxed the week.

“We built our campfire site out in the pasture,” he says. “It was remote but had a beautiful view of the trees. The campers shared the nighttime walk to and from the site, presented skits and songs, and held hands in community. It etched the experience on their hearts.

“Those closing ceremonial circles around the fire ring are still so vivid to me. Watching the joy and love they shared is something I will never forget.”

Sacred Spots within Holy Ground

Every ranch or conference center has features named after prominent supporters who have found particular locations there as contact points with the Holy. This may be a walkway, a labyrinth, an observation bench, a garden, or an outdoor chapel.

At CG, you will find the Sarah Monk Study Spot, a special seating area in the woods with benches and a rustic cedar cross. It is a place for small groups to gather for rest and renewal among the towering pines.

Sarah was longtime naturalist and educator in Gilmer, Texas who donated her time and contagious love for nature to CG. An article in the Gilmer Mirror written at the dedication of the spot included these words.

There are many stories from Sarah's year of supporting the Outdoor Classroom at CG. She was especially known for "walks with Sarah." She would awaken campers early in the morning, before breakfast, and take them into the woods. She wanted them to see, among other things, the dew pearlized on spider webs before the sun evaporated it. Sarah always asked her students to consider God's purpose in God's handiwork. She asked them to focus on how every natural detail plays a special role in the ecosystem, mirroring how each of us is created with a unique purpose. She felt that slowing down, focusing, spending time amidst the wonders of creation is a way to heal and renew our souls.

Marie Nelson says, "We chose the name 'study spot' over 'seating area' for a reason. Sarah always taught us to go deeper with our walks in the woods. Not just to take a hike, but to appreciate the beauty, sounds and diversity of the forest."

Marie wrote the following tribute to Sarah, and we excerpt a portion of it here because it stands as an invitation to journey into the natural setting of any camp or conference center.

A Tribute to Sarah Monk (1932 – 2020) by Marie Nelson

Wake me early to see the dew on the spider web before it disappears.

Take me quietly down a trail into the woods and introduce me to the wonder.

Sit with me as a gentle breeze cascades through the forest like a waterfall.

Draw my attention to the flowers clothed in all of their radiance.

Take me by the lake to watch turtles bob to the surface for air.

Hold a dragonfly nymph as I study its special adaptations for survival.

Quiet me as a red-tailed hawk goes swooping overhead looking for its prey.

Show me the view to the west as the sun sets in vibrant purpose, orange, and pink.

Then watch with me as the veil of darkness blankets the earth.

Listen as the sounds of night surround us.

Open the classroom of nature all around me and teach me how to study the gift of Creation.



***Sarah Monk surrounded by friends and family
at Camp Gilmont***

Chapter Two: Camp Culture and a New Vision of Community

*Camp is a liminal space...where the heavenly “life-as-it-should-be” briefly merges with the life of a teenager, and young people glimpse, momentarily but significantly, the inbreaking of God.*⁴

How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity – Psalm 133:1

Many of us have been members of various churches throughout our lives. These experiences of Christian community shape us as followers of Jesus—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse!

A great number of us also participate in more intimate Christian community: study groups, prayer groups, or mission delegations. Such encounters typically invite us to go beyond the selfishness of our own egotistic pursuits. We learn that living in community requires us to communicate, cooperate, and collaborate with people who are different from ourselves; people whose ideas about faith, discipleship, and God are sometimes aligned and other times at odds with our own perspectives. These are invitations into the divine dance of the Holy Trinity, the original community of Love.

Martin Luther King Jr. articulated a vision of the Beloved Community where the sins and scars of racism and oppression—often perpetrated by the church herself—can be overcome by divine love embodied in human relationships of equity and dignity. He gave us a glimpse of community—

heavenly life as it should be—renewing the vision first cast by Jesus in both his teachings and how he lived out the “kin-dom” of God (community of God’s people) with his disciples.

American society has become increasingly individualistic, often isolating us from others, especially those who differ from us. As journalist Bill Bishop demonstrated in his book, *The Big Sort*, we are increasingly arranging our common life around like-minded peers. This includes our choices of worship communities.

The chance to actually live a shared communal life requires intentionality. This is part of the reason that Christian camps are so powerful. They offer opportunities to experience a form of community that is more compelling than what we often find in congregational life. It is an experience that focuses on Christian *praxis* rather than *belief*, a chance to put our faith into action and become better disciples.

Jacob Sorenson, in his landmark book on Christian camping, *Sacred Playgrounds: Christian Summer Camp in Theological Perspective*, (2021) articulates five core components of camp experience that are essential to intentional community. Camp is **Participatory, Faith-Centered, a Safe Space, Relational, and Unplugged**.⁵

In the previous chapter, we heard people describe how their unplugged experience of being in Nature connected them to restorative aspects of themselves and the Holy. In this chapter we will see how the other four building blocks support the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in those who come to camp. Specifically, we will look at how these qualities are incarnated in the ministry of John Knox Ranch, both in its summer camp for youth and its wider ministry to adults.

Background: Rob and Beth Watson became the first full-time residential directors of JKR in 1989. Prior to their arrival, JKR had operated with an on-site camp manager who maintained facilities as the only year-round staff. Volunteer directors (usually pastors) would pull together a team and run a week of camp that they organized and created for the Presbytery's camping program. Every week was different. The rules, culture and programming varied widely.

The Watsons set out to create and establish a clear and consistent camp culture, one suffused with genuine Christian community. They carefully considered every detail of a camper's experience and crafted it to communicate the importance of embodied faith with others. Each daily task, experience, game, or challenge was a thread, carefully woven to create a tapestry that enveloped campers in loving Christian community. Let's take a look at how JKR's camp culture embodies Sorenson's building blocks.



Participation: Within the first hours of arrival at camp, campers and counselors play games to ensure that they know each other's names. This simple rite confers the dignity of "being seen" to each child, regardless of how insignificant they might have felt outside the camp bubble. Next, working together, campers craft a covenant of participation which they sign as a pact for how they will treat one another as cabin mates. This is a critical ritual that teaches about covenantal relationship and our shared responsibility for upholding our promises.

At their first meal, campers sit at a long table together and eat family style with their cabin unit. They establish a rhythm for the week, one in which they take turns getting the food for their table and share responsibilities for cleaning up afterwards. Campers are invited and encouraged to participate in **EVERYTHING!** Many children who have never performed chores like these begin to discover dignity in basic acts of responsibility for themselves and others.

A favorite ritual at JKR is the music time shared after the midday meal. Beginning with "silly songs" and body movements, campers are invited to shed their need to "be cool." They enter into a space of revelry as they follow the young adult leaders being silly themselves. The carefully curated songs have lyrics that communicate deep affirmations, subconsciously underpinning each person's fundamental worth despite our imperfections.

I'm a Little Cookie, a favorite song at JKR, has a wonderful story. Beth Watson (JKR Co-Director at the time) learned the song from her sister and brother-in-law who had picked it up from songwriter, Larry Penn. Penn's wife, Pat, had a career in

working with special needs children of all sorts. Pat felt that there were too few songs tailored to kids such as these. She and Larry often went to a local bakery that sold discounted boxes of broken cookies, irregular pieces that tasted just as good as the whole ones. Larry put pen to paper, and with his guitar he crafted *I'm a Little Cookie*. At camp, motions are added to illustrate the lyrics to the song:

*I'm a little cookie, I am
I was made by the cookie man
on my way to the cookie can
A BIG piece broke off-a me.*

*Well, I'm not be as round as I might be
I'm still as good, just wait and see
I can love back just as twice as hard
as a regular cookie can.*



The song reminds campers that even if they are a bit broken, dented or twisted, they can love and be loved just as well as anyone else! Another favorite is Oscar the Grouch's theme song, *I Love Trash*, from Sesame Street. The song reinforces that all of us can be loved by someone just as we are! After silly songs have worked out some of the campers' energy, they sit for some "settle-down" songs like Tom Chapin's *This Pretty Planet*, which articulates the interconnection of all life upon this earth we call home.

Campers who arrive with no experience or confidence as singers are usually full participants by the end of the week, singing with utter abandon. Further, they often take these songs home to repeat to themselves and their families, carrying the inner reminders of worth and harmony instilled in them at camp.

Participation also extends to the not-so-fun dimensions of community life, like cleaning toilets and sinks and sweeping floors in the cabins. Many kids (and quite a few counselors!) have never learned some of these basic life-skills but become adept at them over the course of camp. If only parents knew! They could get some more help at home once campers return!

Participation also powers JKR's adult retreats. When church elders go out to JKR for their annual planning getaways, they often stay in the same housing. They share rooms, meal preparation, and cleaning responsibilities. This shifts them out of the more rigid role-based expectations they have for one another that are rooted in family and church life. Breaking out of expected roles often deconstructs mental boxes as well, engendering a more creative and authentic exchange of life and faith among leaders.

In the normal course of church work, leaders often meet at the same time, around the same table in the same room, each person often sitting in the same chair they sat in last time! Little about that scenario inspires creativity or out of the box thinking. When you are crammed on top of one another on sofas and arm chairs or sitting on pillows on the floor in a shared living space, you get outside normal operating procedures and open yourself to new ways of thinking, organizing, and imagining the work of the church.

For nearly 20 years now, Divine Redeemer (DR) Presbyterian Church of San Antonio has held a Church and Neighborhood retreat at JKR. Both members and neighbors from around the church get invitations to this weekend retreat. These families are often participants in some of the outreach ministries associated with DR. Normally, about 120 persons attend, and nearly two-thirds of them are not members of the congregation. The weekend is a profoundly participatory experience with families sharing cabins, cooking meals, and engaging in recreation with previously unknown neighbors. Each retreat catalyzes new relationships, strengthening the fabric of the church's connection to the wider community. The participatory nature of the event pushes people out of personal and familial bubbles into a shared and communal space where the Holy Spirit is able to weave them together as one. People may never recall a Bible lesson from the weekend, but they will forever remember the connections they made to one another.

As Jacob Sorenson observes: "The long-term impacts (of camp) are not related to the content of camp lessons, but, rather, to ongoing connection to Christian community...Belief statements and theology are not the things that last from a

summer camp experience. What lasts is engagement with the Christian community, and...understanding that faith is important for daily life.”⁶

Faith-Centered: Participation also permeates the more overtly faith-centered part of JKR’s camp curriculum: daily Bible study and closing worship. Camp Bible studies are led in various natural settings of the camp’s 300 acres—by the creek, in a wooded “cathedral,” beside the Blue Hole, at the labyrinth, or in the outdoor chapel on the hill. Early Celtic Christians described the Bible as the Little Book of Revelation, while the Big Book of Revelation is Creation itself, the first incarnation of God’s presence. By joining the Big Book and the Little Book together in study time, faith-filled conversation is grounded in the Root of all Being, nurturing young people’s capacity to discover the Holy One in the world as well as in the Word.



As their wonder-filled week of participation in faithful conversation comes to an end, campers are charged with creating a closing worship service. Each cabin crafts and contributes one or more elements of the service which takes place in the picturesque outdoor chapel on the hill. Some write a call to worship, others a prayer of confession or assurance of pardon. Often a dramatic presentation of a scripture lesson is created and shared. Worship, which for many of the campers is a spectator sport at home, becomes something they actually make happen. This move from passivity to engagement in telling the story of our faith is a powerful shift for many campers. It is one that local churches would do well to expand upon when campers return to their home churches.



Faith-centered conversation is not restricted to chapel time and closing worship. The themes of chapel study time re-

emerge as campers encounter the real-life challenges of living together in close proximity for a full week. Unlike congregational worshippers who visit church for an hour on Sunday and then depart—often not engaging one another until the following week—campers live together, eat together, play together, clean together, and make decisions together for a full week. This close engagement inevitably creates friction that requires the application of lessons learned in Bible studies. A lesson on forgiveness illuminates how to address the injury one camper experiences at the hands of another. A lesson on shared gifts in the Body of Christ finds concrete expression as cabin groups navigate the ropes course. A meditation on service gives new meaning to the role of plate-washer at lunch that day. Rather than hearing these biblical themes as disconnected from daily existence, campers see how they instruct us to understand and handle real-life experiences as followers of Jesus.



During Divine Redeemer's Church and Neighborhood retreat, there is explicit recognition and conversation about how the Big Book of Creation is a language *all* of us can access. DR serves a community that is significantly impoverished. Consequently, many of its neighborhood families don't have a lot of education; quite a few are essentially illiterate. Reading and comprehending scripture is a challenging enterprise. However, as they turn their eyes and hearts to the gifts of Creation and its holy lessons, people learn to detect the voice of God in our natural world. This is far less threatening and allows *everyone* to share in a conversation about faith. It becomes an inclusive, holy experience that confers dignity on every participant, not just those who are comfortable with reading and interpreting scripture.

Safe Space: One of the most powerful dimensions of a camp environment is the experience of a “safe space” for exploration. Christians affirm that God accepts and loves us just as we are. Father Richard Rohr has said, *“Jesus did not so much love people once they changed, but he loved them so that they could change.”* When we create a safe and loving space for one another, we are wrapping each other in this love of Christ, enabling us to engage in the work of transformation.

The experience of safe space is ubiquitous for campers. They encounter it in the high ropes challenge course that allows them to take risks they never imagined. They find the courage to raise questions about God and self that are too often silenced or avoided in congregations where doctrinal and behavioral expectations often overrule curiosity and doubt. Freed from these constraints of familial and school pressures to conform, campers can explore aspects of their identities they have not

been given space to probe at home, school, or church. For some adolescents, camp becomes the safe space to unfold sexual identity, and many a camper (even sometimes a counselor) will “come out” for the first time to a trusted staffer or friend because they have absorbed the deeply faithful message that they are loved just as they are.

Jessie, a senior in high school from San Antonio, TX shares how important that safe space was for her, first as a camper and then as a Junior Counselor...

Home was not a place where I got to be a kid. My home was chaotic. Every day was a slog through crushingly oppressive realities that never allowed me to experience or express joy. The level of responsibility thrust upon me by the dysfunctionality of my home meant I was responsible for EVERYTHING, and the anger that built up in me was destructive. I was so constantly angry that blowing up was the only way I knew how to respond to stressful situations.

My first time at camp was literally an escape for me. I was allowed to be a kid, to let loose and have fun. I claimed my carefree, silly self. I was able to live in a community where responsibility was shared and not simply dumped on me. Camp allowed me to be vulnerable for the first time. I didn't need to pretend I was someone I was not, or project an image to be accepted. I learned how to ask for help and receive it. I allowed myself to admit weakness and welcome the support and companionship of others as true friends.

One afternoon, when I was a Junior Counselor, exhausted from the constant challenges of dealing with dozens of young children, I began to cry when I realized that instead of being able to take break time I needed to wash out all the tie-dye shirts. Instead of being yelled at and told my feelings didn't matter and to 'just do it' (as would have happened at home), immediately one of my colleagues noticed my emotional condition and stepped in to help. At that moment I learned that admitting my need for help was not a sign of weakness, but a way to lean into the community of support that surrounded me. There was no shame or judgment for allowing myself to feel and express my true feelings. These friends knew me so well that they could recognize when I needed help...even when I could not! It was amazing to know someone could treat me with such kindness. I had never known that before.

I have taken this experience home with me from camp...this is who I want to be in the rest of my life. I can actually live life and be happy! Camp allowed me to see who I could be and then to become that...not just at camp but everywhere.

The safe space of JKR camp culture allows the emergence of questions about God that might normally be glossed over in a typical Sunday School lesson. As the lyrics of the hit song, *Wide Open Spaces* recorded by The Chicks articulates, "(We) need wide open spaces, room to make the big mistakes." It is as if wide-open spaces break open the places in our hearts and souls that have been constricted and long to breathe free.

This is true not only for young campers, but also for church leaders and adults who come for retreats. As elders are sent out with a question to contemplate while walking the labyrinth, or a scripture to consider as they sit beside Blue Hole, the openness and beauty of nature provokes a more soulful connection to their task. This is a great contrast to the hurried reflections that occur at the beginning of church business meetings, times when everyone is eager to get to the agenda. Responses are often perfunctory and superficial. In contrast, the sharing that happens at elder retreats often allows people to reveal their inner struggles and places of brokenness, facets of their lives that are normally hidden from others because there is no time to process the pain or angst. Within the Cathedral of Creation, we can open ourselves to God and to one another in ways that make it safe to share these deeper issues. The liminal nature of this Holy Ground frees us to speak our struggles and to entrust our pain with one another.

Challenge Courses, like the low and high ropes elements at JKR, are some of the best examples of safe space and the growth it encourages. Beginning with simple elements that build a cabin group's trust in one another, these courses gradually invite campers to take increased risks within the confines of secure scaffolding. Campers slowly learn to trust themselves and to rely on the support and tangible assistance of their peers to accomplish feats that they would never dream of doing alone, like jumping off a 30 ft. high telephone pole to grab a trapeze hanging 8 ft away! This exercise, while completely



safeguarded, is still deeply challenging. It requires one to push beyond fears, limitations, and insecurities and trust oneself and one's cabinmates. As such, it is a powerful metaphor for overcoming life's challenges by stepping out in faith. We need a safety net, we need each other, we need self-confidence, we need to know we will be caught when we fail. *All* of us need these things!

Relational: It is obvious by now that camp is consummately relational. All its rituals, routines and recreation provide a framework that requires campers to engage with one

another and, through that interpersonal engagement, encounter God.

Cabin groups often consist of individuals who have never met one another before. They share a living space with complete strangers with whom they will be doing nearly *everything* for the next week. This means that campers will be sharing life with others who may not look like them, think like them, or talk like them for the very first time in their lives.

Mark Twain wrote: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of people and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”⁸ While most campers travel only



a few hours to get to camp, they might as well have travelled to a new world, especially if they are city-slickers. This is an experience of dislocation. Campers are living outdoors with people they don't know, taking risks they have never contemplated, and engaging in activities that are brand new. All of this is deeply disorienting in a positive way, forcing them to confront the ideas and prejudices they carry within them. Twain understood that direct relationships with those who are different from ourselves is what can melt away these problematic attitudes, replacing them with connection, comprehension and compassion.

The intense 24/7 relationality of camp steeps participants in a concentrated exposure to people unlike themselves. It gives

them the chance to discover common ground amid differences and diversity. It places them on a pathway that can help them acquire a more Christ-like appreciation for how *all* of us, no matter how different, are made in the image of God.



Emily Owen, wife of the current JKR Director, Henry Owen, tells the story of one particular cabin group she was part of as a young camper.

When I was twelve, I was assigned to the Chapel Hill cabin for summer camp at John Knox Ranch. There were eight twelve-year-old girls in that cabin, and for some reason God put us together in that very small space for two whole weeks. I was sure after the first full day that I was not going to make it. There was drama and attitude, cliques and gossip. We excelled in selfishness

and judgment. One day during rest time the camp director showed up and told us that she had been so impressed with our cabin group that she had decided to do some special ropes course activities with us in hopes we would be counselors one day. We bought it. We were at the age where we thought we were pretty awesome, and this brilliant camp director played right into that.

So, every day we got to spend two hours doing our special ropes course challenges. We had to work together to solve problems. We had to do things that were silly and in any other situation would have been totally uncool. We had to trust each other and depend on each other. We learned to laugh with each instead of at each other. We learned that for every weakness you could usually find a strength. We learned the value of encouraging others and of being encouraged ourselves. We learned that in our frustrations we had more in common with one another than we thought. By the end of the two weeks, and certainly by God's grace, we may actually have been future counselor material.

I still keep in touch with several of the girls from that cabin because we did in fact serve together as counselors years later. I attribute our success and our ability to thrive together to that camp director who took the time to teach us how to play and have fun, how to not take ourselves too seriously and work for the good of the group. We left much better people than we arrived.

Hopefully, by now you can see how camp community fosters transformation in the practice of Christian life.

Typically, to enter into this camp community one needs to *go away* to camp. But this is often difficult for some children and families, and often for unexpected reasons. One may not be connected to a church that can funnel children into camp. There may be a lack of reliable transportation to drive outside of the city, or the financial resources necessary for payment of camper tuitions.

JKR and Mo-Ranch have also discovered another problem: immigration status. Families living in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) without legal status cannot pass the Border Control checkpoints about 25 miles north of the border. Driving kids to camp might endanger their very ability to continue living in the USA. DR discovered that many families were reticent to attend camps at JKR because of fear of being captured by the Border Patrol on the road. Both camps have crafted clever work-arounds that allow the powerful experience of Christian Community to reach beyond these constraints.

In 2015, Mo-Ranch initiated an off-campus camp experience for the children of the RGV in Edinburgh, Texas. Every summer since, they have taken counselors and supplies to a rented retreat campus. There they provide a week of camp for children who could never attend at the idyllic Guadalupe River campus in Hunt, TX that is five hours north of the border. By choosing to “take camp to the kids,” Mo-Ranch has expanded their circle of community to include those who otherwise would miss out altogether.

In 2019, the New York Times did a feature article on the camp, calling attention to the unusual nature of this experience for the children and youth who attend it.⁹ The director of the camp, Mr. Bombach said. “We *do* want to give them this

opportunity to be in a bubble, to be in this awesome bubble where for this one week they don't have to worry about anything else going on in their families or in the area." This is the power of Christian community mobilized to include the normally excluded!



Similarly, JKR has partnered with DR to provide a two-week long Peace Camp for inner city kids of San Antonio. This includes opportunities to swim, sing silly songs, learn archery and get a taste of what sleep-away camp is like. At the end of each week, the church van transports kids to JKR for a day of swimming in the Blanco River and rousing silly songs with 100 or more

campers. It is not uncommon for Peace Camp kids to sing even louder and more confidently than the regular JKR campers! Once these inner-city kids have had a year or two at Peace Camp, including a chance to see JKR, they and their parents are often willing to try a week of scholarship-subsidized sleep-away camp where they can be fully immersed in the power of camp community and culture.

Perhaps one of the most impressive aspects of Peace Camp has been the development of junior leaders from its ranks.

Nearly a dozen of these inner-city youth have gone on to become summer camp counselors at JKR, helping to diversify its leadership both ethnically and in terms of social class. Once again, we see the power of camp to build the Beloved Community.

The Memorial Day Flood of 2015

This wider Beloved Community came to the rescue of JKR in recent years. On Memorial Day 2015, the camp was devastated when a massive flash flood ravaged the Blanco River Valley in a matter of hours. Flood waters rose to levels never seen before. The camp dining hall was filled to the roof with raging water that turned the walk-in refrigerators into floating wrecking balls that decimated the structure and its contents. Two cabins and an entire bath house also washed away forever. Kathy Anderson, JKR Director at the time, describes how the larger camp community rallied to the rescue almost immediately.

Memorial Day Weekend was shaping up to be a good one. The time was particularly magical, as summer camp staff members had shown up that day for two weeks of training, eager and ready to have the time of their lives over the next couple of months. Life was good.

Unbeknownst to us, it had been raining heavily to the west. As we were finishing our evening activities, ten inches of rain was falling upriver in Blanco. As the night wore on, I noticed that the creek on our property was rising and rising fast. At midnight, I wondered what the river was doing. The river was supposed to be a good quarter mile away. But when lightning flashed,

I caught a vision of something that will forever be burned in my mind. All I saw was the peak of our 30 ft tall Dining Hall roof staring back at me – sticking out of the water. Everything else was under those swirling, roaring waves.

As I stood there in the pouring rain, listening to the end of life as I knew it in those roaring waters, I thought to myself, “Tomorrow is going to be a long, tough day. I should probably get some sleep.” The next morning, Sunday, we took stock of the damage, and quickly made a list of what we thought we needed to start cleaning up and digging out. I then did the only thing that felt right at the time; I turned to our JKR extended family: the congregations, families, and former campers –all who consider the Ranch their home. By the next morning, without even being asked, close to 100 people showed up by 9 AM to work. They brought bottled water, boots, gloves, shovels, and buckets. They brought sandwiches, water pumps, saws, and sledgehammers. Those whose vehicles could make it through the flooded creek crossing ferried others across. We started digging out.

For the next two weeks, seemingly around the clock, JKR’s church family showed up. They tore out soggy drywall. They hung new drywall. They mucked-out the pool. They shoveled mud. And more mud. And still more mud. They sent new life jackets. They built new campfire benches. They built new picnic tables. They cleared brush. They did things without being asked, simply because they saw a need. Congregations from as

far away as New York City, North Carolina, California, and Chicago sent money to help the hands at work. And, by the grace of God incarnated in this truest sense of community, JKR was able to welcome its summer campers on time and on schedule – just 2 weeks after all seemed lost.

Over the course of that summer, we saw the connectional church at work. Literally. Even when camp started, people still showed up to clean up, to volunteer in the makeshift disaster relief camp kitchen, to clear more brush, and to do the next-level work required to start getting John Knox Ranch back on its feet. The waters have long-since receded, and the work has returned to “normal,” but the ties that bind John Knox Ranch to our presbytery and to the larger church are blest indeed.

The experience of community that camp creates sticks with people who have lived it. They forge lasting relationships to the land, to one another, and to the larger community of faith. The impact of camp is life-long for many individuals. In Chapter Three we will explore how camp shapes and empowers people to become servant leaders both within the church and in the larger society.

Chapter Three

Developing Leaders: The Symbiotic Relationship between Camps and Congregations

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come. -

Ps. 71:17-18

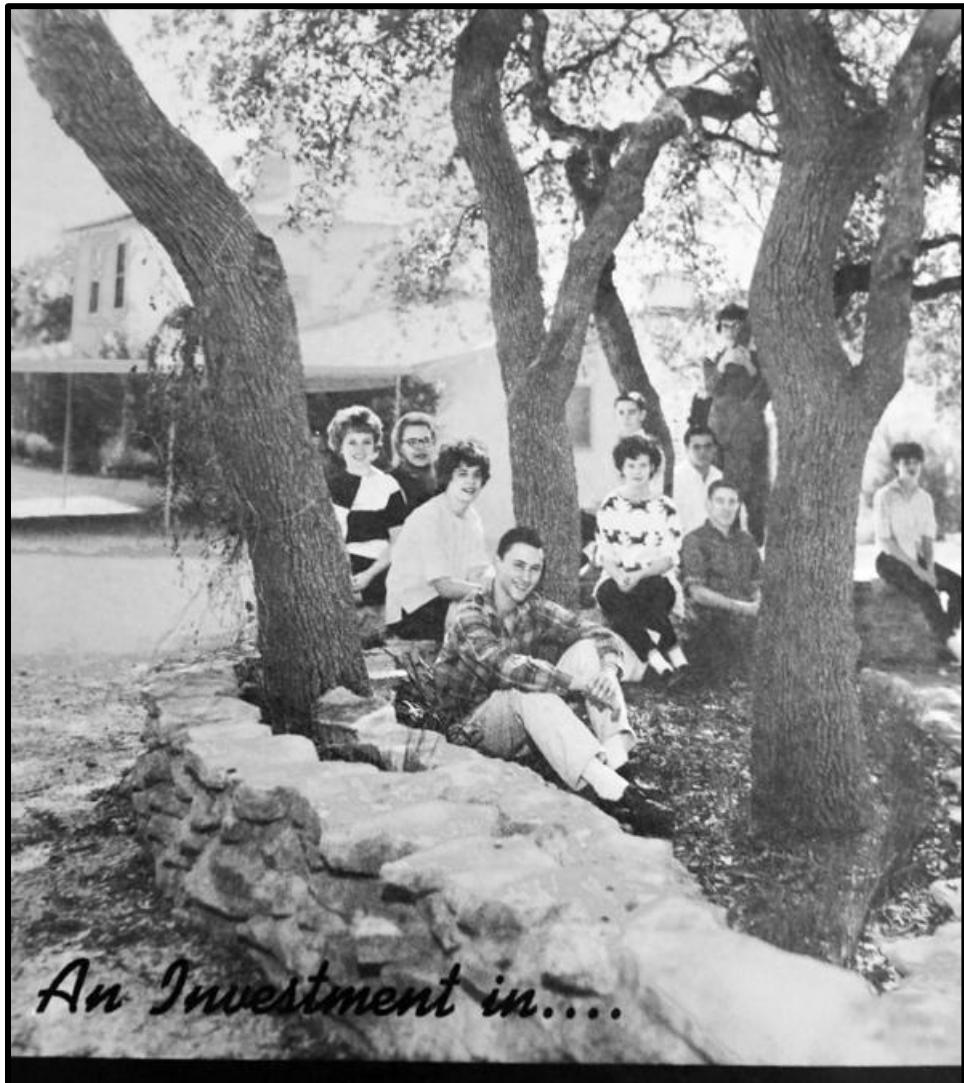
*“Perhaps the most important thing that camp can teach the larger church is to be comfortable with the mess.”*¹⁰

Jesus didn't simply preach, teach and heal. He formed a community which developed leaders so that his mission to make the reign of God visible here and now would continue. The experience of a Beloved Community at camp is more than a mountaintop high. Ideally, this lived experience of community also invites, inspires and energizes leaders who can then take their lived experience out into the church and the world as transformative agents of God's grace.

Leaders in many Christian denominations will point to experiences at camps and retreat centers as seminal to their sense of vocation. In Presbyterian circles, we speak of this as “a calling” to serve God's people. This call has many dimensions: our family histories, our deepest motivations, our personal spirituality, and the presence of certain spiritual gifts. Not all these coalesce at once. Rather, it is a process of discernment within community that requires due diligence and thoughtfulness.

For many individuals, the genesis of this calling often arises in times apart, moments when we encounter the Holy through a direct and unexpected experience of God's voice in the natural

world. In the Old Testament we can turn to the experience of Moses and the burning bush or Elijah's encounter of the still, small voice of God after the storm.



An Investment in....

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Historic poster from John Knox Ranch

Many persons experience God's invitation into ministry through a mystical encounter with this Big Book of Revelation. **Krin Van Tatenhove** describes how his own calling into ministry hinged upon one such moment at Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu, NM.

As an emerging adult I was quite vocal about my repudiation of organized religion, beginning with the Lutheranism of my youth. I had gradually embraced my own form of existentialism, believing that questions about God were unanswerable, even irrelevant. My goal was to live as authentically and powerfully within the short time I had on Earth, creating the script for my life and playing its protagonist with gusto.

Eager to find my own answers and to rest in some modicum of peace, I devoured the sacred texts of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism. I studied Ram Dass, Alan Watts, D.T. Suzuki. Residing in Albuquerque at the time, I sat and conversed with Zen monks who lived in the nearby Jemez Mountains.

Then two things happened that, in retrospect, were clearly divine.

First, a friend invited me to join him for Sunday worship at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church of Albuquerque. There I found a community which I described in one of my former books.¹¹ "From the moment I entered that church, I experienced a homecoming. This was a community of faith that embraced searchers and encouraged free thinking. They respected the sanctity of individual conscience. My personal beliefs were my territory not theirs; they simply celebrated the chance to commune with me."

Second, I deepened my relationship with an amazing piece of holy ground: Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico. I cannot overstate the influence of that magical geography on my journey. It introduced me to God's Presence through:

- The sheer beauty of its painted cliffs, big skies, deep nights awash with the Milky Way. This was indeed the Land of Enchantment—the inspiration for the likes of artist Georgia O'Keefe, who I once met there.
- Late-night conversations with progressive Christians gathered there from around the world. Folks who saw the exploration of faith as integral to transforming humanity. Their theology was rooted in a respect for all people, regardless of race, color, creed, or sexual orientation. I had found a new family, the beloved community we discussed in Chapter Two of this book. I felt privileged to be included in their conversations, and I soaked it up like a desert mesa under summer showers.
- Witnessing the Ranch's faith in action, especially its concern for the environment and its partnership with its diverse neighbors. Northern New Mexico is a unique blend of cultures—Puebloan Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo. The Ranch sought to engage all aspects of these cultures with deep respect and a humble awareness of colonial sins from the past.

A nascent call to ministry was stirring inside me. While it is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when I fully embraced it, I do remember a vivid moment:

I had gotten up early for a solo hike to Chimney Rock, one of the picturesque hoodoo spires that rise above

the Ranch. Even though it was summer, the pre-dawn air had an invigorating nip. I reached the small table of land behind the spire—a vantage point that countless pilgrims have enjoyed. Swifts darted by me at amazing speeds, and in the distance I saw Pedernal emerge in the early light, a landmark left from a cataclysmic eruption of the Valles Caldera, its silhouette so often seen on the horizon in O'Keefe's paintings.

A cool desert breeze stirred around me like the breath of Spirit. I inhaled deeply, opened my arms wide and said, "Here I am. Lead me where you want me to be."



Experiences such as Krin's, in which a taste of true community combines with an invitation from the Holy One speaking through the majesty of Creation, are not uncommon. But they are unpredictable. Is it possible to weave the mysterious and unpredictable dimension of the divine voice in Creation together

with the intentional formation of a beloved community so that leaders can be more reliably inspired and molded to serve the church and the world? Yes, and John Knox Ranch along with many other Christian camps have modeled how to do this for years.

Sorenson argues that the most successful and enduring camp ministries effectively integrate their mission with the mission of the local congregations and judicatories.¹² When established, this symbiotic relationship enables a camp to feed new leadership into the church. In turn, the church feeds new youth into camp who are then shaped into the next generation of leaders for the church and world.

From Inconsistent and Unreliable to Intentional and Transformative

For nearly three decades after it was purchased in 1962, camp experiences at JKR were inconsistent and unreliable. Like many (if not most) denominational camps of that era, individual pastors were recruited by the Presbytery to be in charge of a week of camp, creating their own curriculum and activities, and recruiting their own staff. As we noted in the previous chapter, there was no consistent culture at camp. Every week, a different set of expectations and standards would dominate. One week a camper might be subject to humiliating games and pranks. The next week a safer more supportive environment might be present. There was also no consistent staff training or standards for safety. One pastor might carry out some form of orientation or training for his/her staff, but the next week there might be nothing at all! Consequently, the experiences campers had were also inconsistent, and ranged widely from “wonderful” to ‘horrible’!

The inconsistency and unreliability changed dramatically with the advent of permanent, professional, camp directors, Rob

and Beth Watson. Their arrival marked a shift toward a full-time summer counseling staff who were trained and cultivated to form a community of their own in the service of a common mission: *fostering experiences of Christian Community in the beauty of God's Creation.*¹³ The Watsons eventually crafted a remarkable greenhouse for the formation of young Christian leaders, many of whom became leaders in the ministry of their local congregations.

Every year, the Watsons labored to identify and cultivate a cadre of young adults from across the presbytery into a team with a shared experience of genuinely inclusive and welcoming Christian community. These young leaders learned how to build that same kind of community with the children in their cabins, replicating what they were experiencing themselves as co-counselors on the team. This consistency in training, shared vision, and experience could then be taken back to the local churches across the presbytery so that more children might be inspired and recruited to come to camp.

Central to the Watsons' leader training were some core convictions:

- People learn to lead by leading with the support of a mentor.
- The church is best served by servant leaders, not dominating leaders.
- Servant leaders are self-aware leaders.

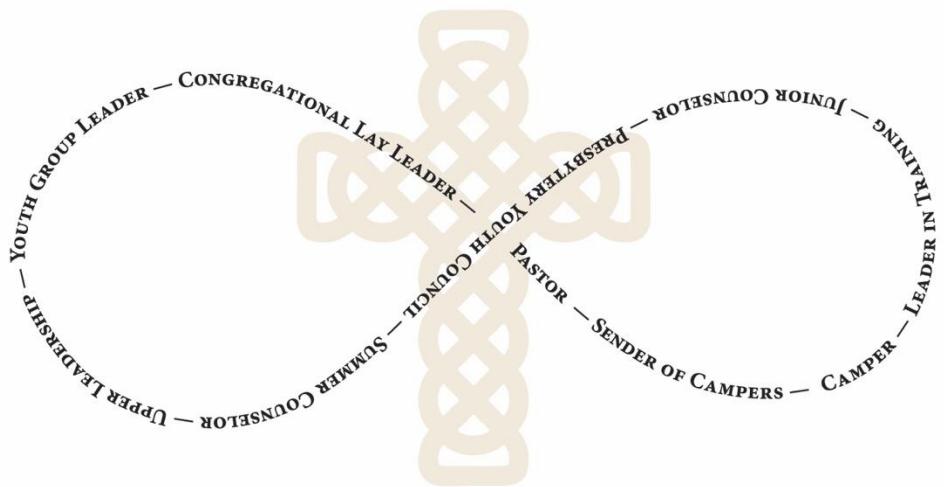
These three convictions shaped the content and the methodology of leadership development efforts at John Knox Ranch. The new directors also drew upon the American Camp Association (ACA) standardized norms and guidelines, which defined best practices for camps of all kinds, religious and secular.

This normalizing of expectations for leadership quickly began to have a significant impact.

Within a few years, a natural selection of trained, capable servant leaders began to emerge as individuals accepted increasing levels of responsibility within the camp leadership formation framework. As elementary-aged campers entered their teenage years, they could apply to become LITs (Leaders in Training) who began absorbing the mission and vision of camp's Beloved Community. LITs could later apply to be junior counselors for the JKR day camp where they would help create an experience of Christian community for young children on daily basis. Once they had graduated from high school, they were eligible to apply for positions as summer counselors who would build community for cabins of campers throughout the summer weeks. Eventually, summer counselors could become upper level young adult leadership, responsible for entire areas of camp activity like the adventure activities, crafts/creative endeavors, water safety/supervision, and kitchen food service. These layers of leadership development served as successive filters which enabled the identification of new, capable youth leadership.

As the directors were able to identify and train emerging youth leaders, these young people were recommended for leadership on the Presbytery's Youth Ministry Council, which planned and led annual conferences for teens across the Presbytery in the winter, spring and fall, thus introducing them into yet another level of church leadership. These conferences provided the perfect opportunity to advertise and promote camp as a great place to learn and grow as a young Christian, which increased the number of kids attending summer camp. Thus, the cycle continued.

In the same way a Celtic knot bends and weaves around itself but is actually a continuous loop, this infinity diagram depicts how camp, when integrated into the life of local congregations and judicatories, becomes a synergizing power for the entire church.



The following testimonies from former JKR staff articulate the lasting impact that their formation in this leadership loop had upon them. Some became pastors, others are leaders in other arenas of work and life. Consistent throughout them is the way being a part of this intentional effort to provide experiences of Christian Community in the beauty of God's Creation shaped their sense of vocation and mission in the world.

Clare Parry Lozano is pastor of Heritage Presbyterian Church in Olathe, Kansas, as well as a leader in the new worshiping community of Farmstead Eight. Clare's journey in the world of Camp and Youth ministry is a shining example of the way an integrated faith-formation ecology can play out in the wider church.

I was really blessed to grow up in Trinity Presbyterian Church in Topeka, Kansas, a church community that cared deeply about faith formation of their young people. One of the ways they nurtured my faith, was by connecting me to Heartland Camp, our summer church camp, where I first attended in fifth grade and continued through High School.



Heartland was the place where the faith of my parents, became my own. Every evening of camp was closed with a vespers service, and one of the favorite spots at camp was Highpoint, the literal highest point on camp, that is marked with a two-story cross that sits on hill overlooking the valley below. I remember so clearly

a vespers service, where our chaplain was preaching about the "ruach" or breath of God, and as he spoke to us about the Spirit's presence with us, a wind kicked up and swirled around us. It was one of the first times I tangibly felt the presence of God and it continued to encourage my burgeoning faith.

During that time, I also became a leader on our presbytery's youth council and began to experience and exercise leadership within a framework that valued and supported youth and invited us to be partners in ministry with our adult sponsors. The affirmation and support I received in the youth council shaped me greatly and led to other leadership opportunities at the Synod and eventually on the National Youth Council of our denomination.

During the summers between my college years I served as staff first at Heartland Camp, and then at John Knox Ranch for 2 years. Once again, camp played a powerful role in nurturing my faith and shaping me as a leader. It was a holy thing to live life together for the summer in Christian community, with a common mission and ministry. Throughout the summer with our staff and in each week with our campers, I had the chance to watch the beauty and power of life lived in the Body of Christ. The depth and richness of the relationships cultivated in those summers were a profound blessing to me.

My relationships with mentors, like Shamaine Chambers and Beth Watson, were an important part of that blessing and played a significant role in nurturing my faith life and my capacity as a leader. Lessons I learned there from them and from my peers still orient my leadership as a pastor to this day. Some examples include:

-The importance of mentors...both having one and being one for someone else. At camp we were learning how to lead and then turning around and teaching others how to lead as counselors for the Leader in Training program.

-Seeing Jesus' servant style of leadership as the model for my own life as a leader, and now as a pastor.

-Collaborative leadership models that build community and value differing perspectives and gifts. Models that make room for more voices because a better result will come from that shared responsibility for the decisions and actions we take.

-The critical nature of small group experience and the deep relationships that are formed in small groups which allow for true transformation, as the trust that is cultivated allows us to let ourselves be seen and deeply known by others. It is in the space created by shared vulnerability in trusting relationships, that God is able to move, as the Spirit continues to shape us more fully into who we were created to be.

Perhaps one of the most important spiritual lessons for me came in the midst of the last summer I served at JKR. I was coming to camp from work I was doing in youth ministry on the inner West-side of San Antonio. Right before I packed up for staff training, one of the youths I worked very closely with experienced a drug cartel invasion of his home. This seventh grader watched his mother held at gunpoint and then grabbed a gun and shot after the invaders as they left. The violence that erupted in his house that day, overflowed into our neighborhood's streets and I knew as I headed to camp, that it likely wasn't over. I was struggling in

those early days of staff training, because I did not know if this youth I loved would survive, but also because I realized I did not have the power to ensure that he would. In worship during training, Beth would sing this song with these words that washed over me, "Holy Spirit, fall on me - Tell me, how long and how wide, is the love of Christ, how long and how wide is the love of Jesus Christ?" I found myself wrestling with that question — was that love long enough, wide enough to cover him, to cover me, to cover our neighborhood — could it manage to cover us all?

That youth ended up coming to camp that summer and it was a really beautiful week. It took him some time, but I got to be his counselor and watch up close as he left his harder self behind for a bit and had the chance to just be a kid. There was definitely some culture-shock going on and so he engaged things as he could, but I will never forget this moment, when Beth was leading songs before we headed out into our last full day of camp and she started singing that song..."Tell me, how long and how wide, is the love of Christ, how long and how wide, is the love of Jesus Christ." As we sang, I watched this kid who hadn't engaged much in worship most of the week, stop the goofing off he was doing off on the side, and turn and listen to her words. He stayed there, with this intent focus, taking it in as we kept singing those words, and I felt this rush, that wasn't all that different from the "ruach" of God first moving through me years before back in the Heartland. I felt God's Spirit tangibly that day, and I started to trust in a truth that has become the one thing I can put my trust in as the chaos that is this life and world has continued to unfold over the years. The love of Jesus Christ is long enough, wide enough — to cover me, to

cover him — to cover all that is broken within us and around us — the love of Jesus Christ is long enough, wide enough to cover us all.

Spencer Somerville shares how JKR shapes his role as a teacher and coach to this day...

JKR ingrained in me a calling to help young people. I wasn't sure about much in the summer of 2005, except that I knew that some of my best memories were from my time at JKR. Indeed, the times that I felt most "on" in life--the times where I felt fulfilled spiritually and my heart was fullest--were when I worked with high schoolers as a JKR counselor. So, when I decided to change paths and leave architecture to go into public education as a teacher and coach, it was largely because of my leadership experiences at JKR.

The influence of JKR didn't stop with that decision, however. On my very first day as a classroom teacher, I opened with the same get-to-know-you games that I led as a camp counselor (and to this day, I occasionally still pull them out in a crunch)! A bit unconventional for a geometry classroom...but it did the trick.

Now, in my 13th year in education overall and 11th as a coach, I still lean on the lessons I learned at JKR. So much of what I do now is the same as what I did then: it is about building relationships with and among strangers, by uniting them under a common purpose and spirit. At JKR my fellow counselors and I tried to build a team among whatever campers piled out of their parents' cars on the first day of camp. These days I try to build a

sports team out of whatever kids pile out of their parents' cars at my school. The settings have changed, but to a large extent my goals and parameters remain the same.

The other thing that has remained the same is my approach. At JKR, I found that self-deprecating humor, asking questions to get people to talk about their own lives, kindness, forgiveness, acceptance of silliness, and unconditional support were the best ways to motivate people. I use these same approaches with my high school football team today.

I think the best thing I ever learned at JKR is that leadership requires empathy. As a camper, I began to understand empathy (though I couldn't put a name on it) by watching my counselors, and as a counselor, I couldn't help but absorb it from the staff around me. Empathy is everywhere at JKR: consoling homesick campers, pausing to consider why a troublesome camper may be acting out, cheering for campers getting their first taste of performing for a crowd, picking your coworkers up as they vent about a stressful cabin assignment, understanding the experiences of campers outside the confines of JKR. Regardless of the situation, people just want to know that you care enough about them to try to understand how they feel. This was true at camp, true in the football locker room, and true in the classroom.

I will always remember the cabin that forever sold me on JKR: Star Meadow, second session, 1998. I was still a rookie counselor, a little bit unsure of myself and a little intimidated by my more experienced co-counselor for the session, Emily. The two of us were charged with leading 5 boys and 6 girls who were emerging from the

awkwardness of their freshmen year of high school, right smack in the middle of each of their journeys to discover themselves. The personalities among us were as varied as they were strong and opposed!! Emily and I had a real Breakfast Club situation on our hands! She and I shared a raised-eyebrow glance across our circle of campers during our first afternoon of get-to-know-you games. One camper hinted towards childhood experiences marked by hurt, distrust, defensiveness, and anger. In part this was the product of high school social pressures, but I could tell that it also ran deeper. I remember thinking to myself that mealtimes for the next two weeks were going to be...uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, for whatever reason--I credit Emily's disarming nature, and JKR's accepting environment--she and I clicked: Emily was the yin to my yang, the short to my tall, the willing punchline to my lame jokes and the silliest partner for ad-libbed silly songs. In brief moments out of earshot of our campers, we agreed that we absolutely would not be defeated this session. We told ourselves that if we could get this cabin group to jell, that we would go down as the greatest counselors of all time! We were determined to deliver to these campers the same love for JKR (and each other) that drove us.

Our chemistry was contagious. We (and really, the JKR culture) began to break down barriers among our campers a little at a time, through incremental victories on the ropes course, little moments during Chaplain Time, fanatical participation in Silly Songs, and through exulting in a silly but common interest (duct tape!). Each night, Emily and I debriefed with our campers out on the

picnic tables in front of our cabins. We enshrined (in duct tape, of course) the covenant that our campers had composed on the first day of the session; Emily and I were tenacious in holding the principles of that covenant in place. And it worked! From some of those evening debriefing sessions emerged words of wisdom and acceptance that I would have never have dreamed of hearing from teenagers...much less these!

By the end of the two weeks, we had our Kum-by-yah moment. On the penultimate evening of the session, we



held our evening debriefing at the top of Lookout Point. We were all so proud and happy. I remember telling the campers that it was one of those moments where I just wanted to forever encapsulate the feeling of that snapshot in time. Seeing those eleven campers arm in arm was among the most satisfying and spiritual experiences of my

life--one in which God was clearly present. The photo below is of that very moment.

This was the moment I look back on that defined my years at JKR. It was the moment when I learned that, “Yes, full of God’s Spirit, you can work wonders with kids.” It motivates me to this day.



Kelsey Campbell (front right) reflects on learning about how to be a self-aware, servant leader at JKR.

JKR helped me to see that to be a good leader you need to be part of a whole. Camp doesn't run with just one of us. It took everyone in their different leadership roles to make everything run smoothly.

I learned that being a leader isn't always glamorous. Sometimes it means getting dirty. Sometimes it means doing the job no one else wants to do (wiping poop off a bathroom wall, cleaning up vomit, unclogging toilets, combing out lice). Sometimes it means doing work you will never get credit for and may never even be recognized for

having done, like washing bedding for a kid who wet the bed, sneaking in during the day so no one else even knows it ever happened.

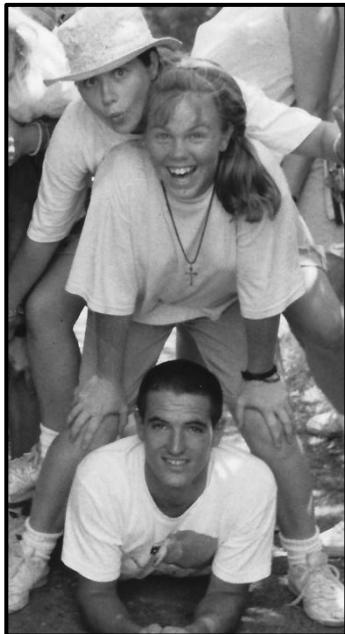
I learned that being a leader means knowing your strengths and weaknesses. I was great at leading the high ropes elements and became the Adventure Director. But I had zero aptitude for arts and crafts, and I stayed far away from there!!

I also learned that as a leader you need to be able to delegate tasks and recognize when to ask for help. As a counselor I supervised the JC for my cabin, which was the first supervisorial role I ever had. Then, when I was on the Upper Leadership team working with counselors and JCs, I learned how to delegate responsibility, explaining what needed to be done, then making a plan and expecting them to follow it.

From my earliest experiences of being an LIT, through JC, Counselor and Upper Leadership I learned how to interact with kids of all ages. My enjoyment of this led me into a teaching career where the skills in managing groups of kids that I acquired at JKR came in very handy!

Meredith Weatherby (center in photo below) shares the ways in which her time at camp allowed her to discover new gifts and passions which continue to thrive in her to this day.

My connection to JKR actually began as a member of the presbytery's Youth Coordinating Council (YCC) which helped to plan the annual winter youth conference for the presbytery. That was where I met Beth Watson. YCC



was a powerful experience of being empowered as a young person. The adult leaders truly opened a space for us to lead and then learn to lead even better. We were wrapped in loving support that allowed us to make mistakes and we were challenged to step out into roles that we never would have imagined possible. I felt heard and powerful for the first time in my life.

Many of our YCC meetings took place on the JKR grounds, which is how I first set foot on that

holy ground. It was at YCC that the JKR Director, Beth Watson, identified my capacity and after my first year of college, she recruited me to be a summer counselor at JKR. I spent the next 4 summers serving on staff. Whereas YCC gave me a few weekends a year to bask in this intentional embrace of a loving and nurturing community. Two and a half months each year for four years at John Knox Ranch gave me the chance to live and grow in that loving and supportive embrace in ways that changed me forever.

In my family, with a mother who was a performance pianist, I never seemed to measure up musically. At JKR I had the freedom to be an imperfect music leader. I picked up and learned guitar and then started leading singing at camp. Something I found profoundly liberating and fulfilling. So much so that I wanted to share that experience with campers. Together with another co-counselor (who later became my husband!)

we started teaching guitar lessons at the outdoor chapel as one of the optional activities. My husband still has a friendship bracelet hanging on his guitar from that summer. During the week we would teach the kids one song that later would be shared with the whole camp at the closing worship service. I loved passing along my own experience of empowered discovery within the framework of love and acceptance of imperfection to a new generation of kids.

That chapel, which was built in honor of the father of my ‘camp sister’ Lisa, has become a holy and liminal place for me. Shortly after it was built I went there during a break, and thought about my friend Lisa--sweet, loving, gentle, strong and wise, and feeling sad for her loss... it was there God said to me... “but look what has been given because of his passing! Consider all the good that will happen in this place.” Now, every time I come to the ranch I go to the chapel because of the powerful sense of God’s Presence that it provides me. It is truly a ‘thin place’ for me.

My family never was outdoorsy. At JKR I discovered that I LOVED nature and being outdoors. In fact, after living outside in screened cabins all summer long without air conditioning, I remember going home to FREEZE in our air-conditioned house! At the Ranch I developed a passion for the importance of spending time in Nature, loving to swim in the chilly waters of the Blue Hole and take in the spectacular vistas from Lookout Point. This love for Nature which was nurtured at JKR eventually led me to my vocation as an Environmental

Engineer, and has us choosing as a family to spend our break and vacation times in the outdoors all the time.

Another lasting impression for me was the experience of being in a community where you could come as you are with no pretense. We could be silly, and fun and didn't need to play it 'cool.' We could simply be ourselves...and often we were just figuring out what that self looked like! We got to experience this vulnerable and freeing community and then were sent out to replicate that with the kids I counseled. We were challenged to offer "Inconvenient Hospitality" that is, to go out of our way to make campers feel welcome, to help them feel like camp would not be the same without them. That, I believe, is what Christian discipleship is all about.

Today I continue to be an involved advocate for camp ministry. I am on the JKR oversight committee and serve on the board of another camp in Colorado. My life is a testament to the transformative power of the camp experience to instill a sense of purpose and belonging, to connect us to the Nature that supports our lives, and to be showered with love and support and then sent to recreate that for others.

We conclude this chapter by sharing the story of **Sam Junkin** who, at 90 years old, reflected upon his decades of involvement with JKR, from the very beginning. His leadership legacy now spans four generations and his invitation to support JKR resonates with wise leadership still!

Sam was the pastor of the Presbyterian church in San Marcos when the presbytery was looking for a camp

property. As the pastor of the closest Presbyterian church to JKR, he recalls being called to join the search committee for a ‘walkabout’ on the property before they decided to purchase it. He recalls that Mr. and Mrs. Meyers, the owners, were wanting to sell so they could build a retirement home. “When I saw the creek, the Blue Hole and the Blanco River frontage, I recalled my growing up years in Kerrville along the banks of the Guadalupe River and at Mo Ranch where I had been one of the first group of counselors. It reminded me how much I had loved that land.”

Once the property was purchased, Bob Bass, a retired petroleum engineer who now served as the Associate Executive of the presbytery was charged with creating a camp program. He built the first primitive hogan on the property, and recruited Sam to lead the first camp week at JKR. Sam organized a work camp to build more hogans so more people could use the camp!

Today, the Junkin family boasts four generations of JKR involvement. His son, David, is on the JKR oversight committee, his granddaughters supervise the day camp and will occasionally lifeguard at the pool in the summer, and his great grandchildren are now campers in the summer. For years, Sam and his wife Adele made it their practice every



spring to come and clean and re-stain the chapel on the hill at JKR until it became physically impossible. At Christmas, their family's practice is not to give personal gifts among themselves, but to make gifts to institutions like John Knox Ranch that make a difference in the world. It should be no surprise then, that Sam and Adele have chosen to include JKR in their wills.

Sam recalled, "David Stitt, former president of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, taught me once how scripture teaches us that 'Givers are happier than



Keepers.’ I have found that to be true in my life. It gives us deep joy to support a place that has been such a blessing for my family.”

These are but a few of the thousands of personal testimonies that demonstrate the power of camp experiences to transform lives and inspire vocational callings both within and without the church. You may also have such a story to tell! Each story reminds us how a well-designed and executed camp ministry is vital to the church’s ability to build, support and lead the Beloved Community of Jesus’s followers.

Conclusion

In Joni Mitchell's well-known lyrics from *Big Yellow Taxi*, we hear the warning that others have also articulated:

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot*

We don't want to wake up some day without church-related camps because of expedient, short-sighted economic decisions to "pave paradise." Too much will be lost. Our concern in this book is to demonstrate through stories, history and photographs the power and potential that Christian camp ministry holds for invigorating the life of the church as well as the lives and faith of those who participate in camp as campers and staff. Camp is not just for campers. Camp is for the *whole* church. We hope that you can affirm with us that these places connect us to Creation, strengthen the bonds within the human family, and even offer the genesis of new vocations.

Our longing is for denominations like ours, the Presbyterian Church, USA, to recognize and continue to invest in this integral form of faith formation. When camp ministry becomes a valued component of the entire ecology of the church's faith formation process, a powerful experience of the Holy Trinity emerges:

- We experience the transforming power of the God of Creation and are moved to take more seriously our own connection to the earth—a critical lesson for this time of climate crisis.

- The Spirit of Community blows among us to inspire and craft lived experiences of the Beloved Community so we can continue striving for a better common life where differences are not experienced as divisive, but enriching, and where we encounter a safe space within which we may allow our own God-given identity to unfold and flower.
- And the Christ, who first formed this community and who crafted leaders to carry forward his mission and ministry, will continue to call and shape leaders for future generations of the church.

May our reflections help you to find your place as a participant, a leader, or an advocate for camp wherever God has planted you!

Grace and Peace,
Rob Mueller and Krin Van Tatenhove
February 2022

Two Favorite JKR Recipes

(Be watching for the full JKR Cookbook!)

Braided Bread

Ingredients for One loaf:

2 and 1/2 cups hot water

2T yeast

2T+2t sugar

1T salt

1/2 cup dry milk

1/4 cup oil

6 cup unbleached flour

Softens yeast in the water in a large mixing bowl, or a stand mixer bowl. Add all the rest of the ingredients and stir with a wooden spoon, or the dough hook attachment on the mixer. Mix or stir until dough is smooth and creating long strands from the sides as you mix it. Cover and let the dough rise until double in size. Turn out onto floured board and without excessive handling, shape into a long rectangle, then cut into 3 strands for braiding. Braid the loaf, pressing top and bottom together to secure the strands. Place on a greased cookie sheet and let rise again (about 30-45 minutes). Bake in a conventional oven at 400 degrees for 20-30 mins until golden brown. Pull apart or slice, slather with butter and enjoy!!

Go to the JKR YouTube Channel to see a video of Beth Watson making this recipe:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63qpW5amMTI&t=1s>

Homemade Vanilla Ice Cream

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ gallons

Mix in ice cream can:

2 cans sweetened condensed milk

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups sugar

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups egg beaters

2 cups heavy whipping cream

2 T vanilla

add whole milk to fill line on can

Process in your ice cream freezer and enjoy!!

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p. 60 Lea Watson Vick, Peace Camp archive, Divine Redeemer Presbyterian Church

p. 65 from JKR Archives, original Presbytery fundraising brochure for John Knox Ranch, cir. 1963

p. 68 Chimney Rock with Pedernal in the distance at Ghost Ranch by Rex Stewart

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p. 86 photo courtesy of Sarah (Junkin) Hernandez

p. 87 photo courtesy of Emma Junkin

Rob Mueller was ordained as a minister in the PCUSA in 1987. Since 1994 he has been the pastor of Divine Redeemer Presbyterian Church, a 120-member urban Hispanic (bilingual/multicultural) congregation in San Antonio, TX. Rob loves to give hugs, hike, hunt, fish, garden, dance (to almost anything), practice yoga, sing karaoke (Spanish and English), take photos, write poetry, kayak, travel, brew his own beer and ride his motorcycle. Rob and his wife, Beth, live in Wimberley, TX and between them they have 6 adult children.

Krin Van Tatenhove is a writer, photographer, and Master Naturalist. He was a Presbyterian pastor for 32 years, serving churches in urban, suburban and rural settings, always an advocate for ministries of justice. He has also been an organizer for Habitat for Humanity, a substance abuse counselor, a hospice chaplain, and Director of a nonprofit. His 40 years of professional writing experience have led to countless articles and a dozen books. You can freely download most of his work by visiting krinvan.com. Krin holds a doctoral degree in ministry, his dissertation plumbing the meaning and power of spiritual gifts. He is married, has four precious children, and currently lives with his wife and special-needs adult son in San Antonio, Texas.

In 2019 Rob co-authored with Krin *Neighborhood Church: Transforming your congregation into a powerhouse for mission*, which was selected to be the PCUSA's church-wide study book for 2019.

End Notes

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