

## Report of the Camp Mitchell Task Force

**Mandate & Membership:** Facing declining summer camp registrations and ongoing financial losses, despite a significant increase in Diocesan financial support of Camp Mitchell, the Rt. Rev. Larry Benfield on January 30, 2020 appointed a Diocesan Task Force to study the health and viability of Camp Mitchell. The charge to this Task Force was to report back to Executive Council, Standing Committee, and Bishop of the Diocese of Arkansas with a recommendation for the camp's future. The following people were appointed to serve on this task force:

The Rev. Mary Vano (St. Margaret's, Little Rock)  
Mr. Ted Gammill (St. Mark's, Little Rock) and Treasurer, Diocese of Arkansas  
Ms. Cheryl Kester (Grace, Siloam Springs)  
Mr. Philip Tappan (St. Mark's, Little Rock)  
Mr. Jim Tilley (St. Mark's, Little Rock)  
The Rev. Greg Warren (St. Peter's, Conway)

### **Process:**

Immediately upon appointment by the Bishop, the Task Force began meeting regularly. Meetings focused on developing a historical understanding of Camp Mitchell's operations and finances, researching the competitive landscape and possibilities for generating revenue, as well as developing a list of possible outcomes of the Task Force's work. **The Task Force expressed its unanimous hope that it would be possible to ensure the future sustainability of Camp Mitchell as a ministry of the Diocese of Arkansas.**

Meetings and research completed by Task Force members include the following:

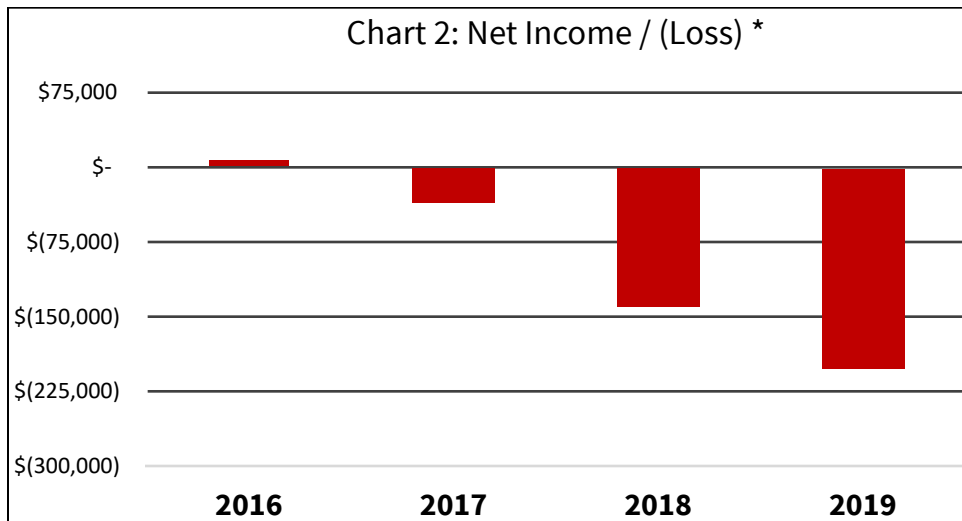
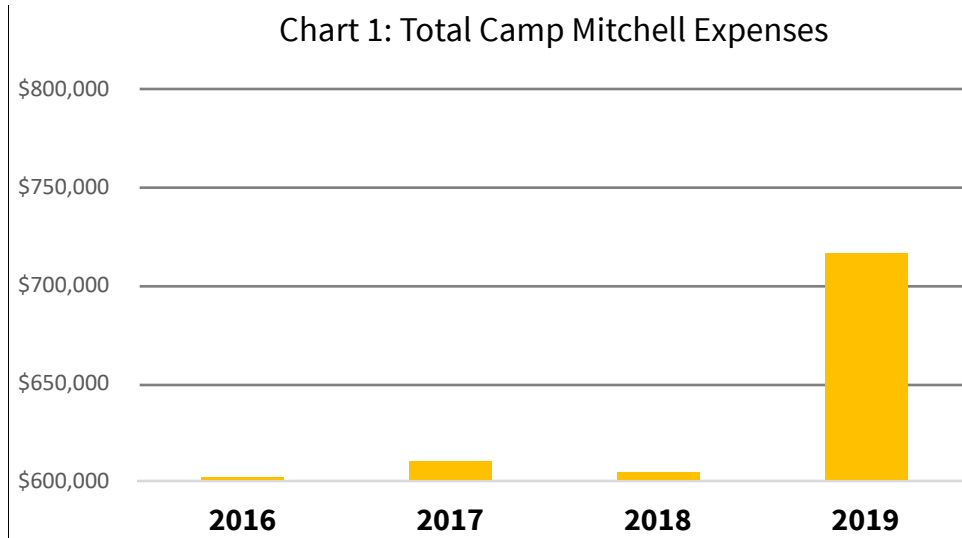
- Feb. 24, 2020 – Task Force meeting to develop research questions, assignments, and possible outcomes (See *Appendix A* for a list of possible solutions under consideration).
- March 9, 2020 – In-depth review of Camp attendance and finances over several years, led by Treasurer Gammill.
- Research into the competitive camp/retreat landscape in Arkansas, comparing amenities, prices charged, and focus of summer camp programs (stronger focus on Christian formation or activities).
- March 13, 2020 – Day-long site visit to Camp Mitchell, including a tour of facilities to review improvements made as well as repairs and upgrades still needed; interviews with leadership, staff, clients/users of the camp, and board members (See *Appendix B* for list of those interviewed).
- March 18, 2020 - Interviews of former director and current consultant with Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers Helen Hargreaves and with the Bishop.
- Additional interviews conducted by individual Task Force members of Camp Mitchell donors and clients/users.

Originally, the Task Force had planned to continue researching in order to prepare recommendations by mid-May. However, the potential impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on Camp Mitchell revenues in 2020 heightened the urgency of the Task Force to make financial recommendations in a rapidly changing environment.

### **Findings - Financial:**

Diocesan and Camp leadership have been acutely aware of an increasingly fragile financial situation at Camp Mitchell. A decade of declines in summer camp registrations (down 40.5% since 2010; see *Appendix C*) and an increasingly aging and out of date physical plant create a challenging environment in which to achieve financial sustainability. Two charts on the following page illustrate

this with startling clarity. **Chart 1** shows the dramatic increase in camp expenses by 2019, while **Chart 2** reveals several years of growing operating deficits.



\* Before depreciation expense

Clearly, such an operating model is not sustainable. We wish to emphasize that this situation has developed despite consistent financial support provided by the Diocese (\$50,000 per year in every year since at least 2016, with an increase of \$40,150 provided in 2019. This Diocesan support was excluded from the calculations of net income and loss above. Please see **Appendix C** for more detailed financial information regarding declining attendance, despite increased investments in facilities and marketing/communications.

### **Findings - Other:**

The Task Force's research and conversations with Camp Mitchell stakeholders revealed at least five major underlying, systemic, long-term challenges that combine to prevent Camp Mitchell from thriving as a ministry of the Diocese of Arkansas. These challenges are separate from the financial difficulties of the Camp, but contribute to those difficulties. The five challenges to success include the following:

- **Dysfunctional Management/Operating Environment** – There exists a lack of clarity about the mission and vision of Camp Mitchell and the roles that each leader must play to carry out the ministry of this institution and its development. These leaders and stakeholders include the Diocesan office, Camp Mitchell Board of Trustees, Executive Director and staff, and the Board of Visitors. The lack of clarity has prevented Camp Mitchell from taking healthy steps forward to resolve ongoing problems and adapt to a changing culture. It has also contributed to a lack of accountability to develop and adhere to balanced operating budgets, since there is a sense that the Diocese will always “bail out” the camp. To varying degrees, the unclear roles and sense of who has ultimate authority and accountability have been problematic for decades. More recently, conflicts between staff and the Board of Trustees have developed, and the Camp has developed an environment of inhospitality, as reported by camp patrons.
- **Facilities Weaknesses and Deferred Maintenance** – Despite many recent improvements to facilities, more remains to be done than there are finances to address. Deferred maintenance issues have accumulated for decades. As a result, almost every building on the campus has at least some need for repair and improvement, with many having major needs, and with some buildings in such poor condition they should probably be demolished. Needed repairs for simple safety and functionality are very important but are only part of the challenge. The layout and amenities of the facilities are obsolete from the perspective of several constituencies. As just one example, most sleeping rooms require two to four adults to share a room, which we have found limits the ability to attract guests.
- **Opportunity Cost-Diocesan Office Staff Workload** – Camp Mitchell is a ministry of the Diocese of Arkansas and is appropriately supported with staff and financial resources. Already, the Diocese has increased its financial commitment to the Camp Mitchell budget, while also taking over much of the accounting and even phone answering/reservations work from Camp staff. However, the Bishop and Executive Council have determined that these increasing demands on diocesan staff and budget cause an inordinate strain on resources that are needed for other important ministries.
- **Competition from Faith-Based Youth Programs/Camps** – The Natural State has many youth camps that can offer amenities that Camp Mitchell cannot. Rev. Greg Warren, with his extensive background in business, studied the Arkansas camp/retreat center competitive landscape. Camps charging rates similar to Camp Mitchell generally offer facilities that are more modern, extensive programming, and amenities/activities not available at Camp Mitchell. Youth camps that charge lower rates appear to be heavily subsidized. Not only does Camp Mitchell compete against other camps in Arkansas, but is also challenged by changes in youth culture and competing demands on family time and financial resources (such as sports teams), all of which contribute to the ongoing declines in summer camp registrations.
- **Lack of Engaging Programming for Shifting Demographics** – As summer camp registrations decline, the Camp must develop alternative revenue streams. Many creative approaches have been tried, with some success adding retreats, weddings, and festivals. However, the Camp has not proactively developed programming to serve its primary constituency and mission—Episcopalians in Arkansas. Camp Mitchell operates as a “location”—a place where outside groups design and deliver their own activities and do most of the work to run their own retreat or event. There has been no identifiable coordination with the Diocese to develop Camp Mitchell's role in Christian Formation for

constituencies beyond summer camp. Instead of developing retreat programs and leveraging the possibility of multiple retreats held at once, the Camp does not actively support group leaders and ministries in fulfilling their mission.

**Recommendation:**

On the basis of these serious underlying challenges facing Camp Mitchell that cannot be resolved simply by an influx of cash, the Task Force began developing a list of key actions that should be taken to form Camp Mitchell into a healthy, functional ministry of the Diocese of Arkansas that is ultimately financially sustainable. Those recommendations appear below.

Given the inability to develop a balanced budget for Camp Mitchell for 2020 and the extensive work necessary to achieve these restructuring recommendations, the Task Force recommends that Camp operations be temporarily suspended, to the extent practical, in order to focus on a comprehensive reformation initiative.

Now that Covid-19 is likely to impact the health and safety of both patrons and staff, as well as 2020 operating income, it is recommended that Camp Mitchell cease operations as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup> The Task Force recommends that the Bishop, with the Camp Mitchell Board of Trustees, form a Reconstitution/Reformation Committee to prepare the camp for possible re-opening.<sup>2</sup>

The camp should not re-open until the following objectives have been met:

- A clear mission statement is developed.
- A vision for creative ministry and excellent Christian Formation is articulated.
- Leadership roles are defined and expectations set, both for members of the Board of Trustees, and for paid staff positions.
  - Clear lines of responsibility with the Bishop and Executive Council are outlined, with a culture of accountability among all parties.
  - A process is developed to ensure the Camp Mitchell Board of Trustees can be populated with the diversity of skill-sets necessary to be an effective working Board, collaborating with staff to achieve operational and financial goals.<sup>3</sup>
- A Business Plan that enables the Camp to price its offerings to generate sufficient revenue and annual balanced budgets is put into place
  - This should include plans for debt reduction and addressing deferred maintenance.
  - This should include a comprehensive list of deferred maintenance needs with costs
  - This should include a plan for annual contributions to a maintenance reserve fund or a reserve for replacements
  - This should include recommended updates to facilities needed to retain patrons and maintain or increase revenue
- An annual fundraising goal is set and a strategy developed that clearly articulates how the fundraising will be done and who will be responsible. A database of past users and other potential donors needs to be created.
- The possibility of a capital campaign for facilities updates/repairs is explored once there is a clear strategy for sustainable operations
- Options for selling part of the property, partnering with other churches and ministries, and other creative ideas for long-term sustainability are fully explored.
- Highly capable leaders with appropriate experience are sought and hired to execute the re-opening of the camp in partnership with the Board of Trustees.
- Clear guidelines for staff, including standard operating procedures, accounting policies and procedures, personnel policies, whistleblower policies, and emergency plans are created/revised.

Though we hope that the danger of COVID-19 will soon pass, given the underlying financial and operational challenges facing the camp, a significant amount of time will be needed to reassess and reset the camp so that it can move forward on a firm foundation for success.

**For Further Consideration:**

Aiming for excellence, the Board of Trustees and the Camp Mitchell staff will need support to meet and maintain the objectives above. Beyond this period of transition, an ongoing association with Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers and/or the Christian Camp and Conference Association will help provide continuing education for staff and other leaders. The Board of Trustees will also need ongoing training, and an organization such as BoardSource can provide necessary resources. The Association of Fundraising Professionals, The Episcopal Church Foundation, and The Episcopal Network for Stewardship are organizations that provide guidance, expertise and tools for ongoing fundraising. These valuable support systems will require financial commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> We anticipate the cancellation of 2020 Summer Camp and potential closure of the camp for the remainder of 2020, with the possible need to extend this closure into 2021, given the magnitude of the reformation tasks. The Treasurer is working with Diocesan and Camp staff to develop a minimal staffing plan to maintain and protect the camp property. A clear decision must be made regarding how far into the future currently scheduled events should be cancelled and appropriate refunds issued, or if it makes financial sense to keep some events such as weddings and an annual guitar festival on the books.

<sup>2</sup> It is further recommended that this group receive guidance from Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers, which can provide consultants to assess and make recommendations regarding the property, mission, and leadership of the camp. <https://www.episcopalccc.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Diocesan Canons relevant to the appointment of the Executive Director of Camp Mitchell and the election/ appointment of its Board of Trustees may need to be considered for possible change. The Board needs to have the ability to recruit participants with particular skill sets and experience and the time and commitment to put in significant effort collaborating with staff and functioning as an effective liaison between the Executive Director and Executive Council.

## **Appendix A: Possible Financial Strategies the Task Force was Charged to Consider**

The Task Force and Bishop are clear that their strongest desire is to develop a solution whereby Camp Mitchell may continue as a beneficial ministry of the Episcopal Church in Arkansas for decades to come. However, all options, including the ultimate closure of Camp Mitchell, are under consideration. This list of possible strategies was designed to address the Camp's ongoing financial struggles. The most appropriate solution will depend upon the success of the Reconstitution/Reformation Committee in addressing the underlying operational and governance challenges that negatively impact the financial situation.

- Reducing programming to summer camp only.
- Reducing operations to summer months only (to include summer camp, rentals, and special events).
- Staff reorganization.
- Improved annual stewardship offerings.
- Capital campaign and/or planned giving.
- Building the endowment.
- An all-in marketing campaign.
- Sale of some of the land.
- Sale of entire property and lease-back to the Diocese to operate summer camp.
- Merging operations with one or more other religious or denominational camps.
- The closure of Camp Mitchell.

**Appendix B:**  
**Personnel Interviewed by the Camp Mitchell Task Force**

- Duncan Ely, current Executive Director.
- Michael Briggs, Chair of the Board of Trustees.
- Robert Wetherington, former Executive Director.
- Randall Curtis, Diocesan Youth Missioner (offering a “user” perspective).
- Harold Hedges, Member of the Board and active Volunteer leader.
- Helen Hargreaves, former Executive Director and consultant with Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers.
- Bishop Benfield.

## Appendix C: History of Declining Summer Camp Attendance at Camp Mitchell

As the chart below makes clear, summer camp registrations have steadily declined over the last decade. The bar graph separates out traditional summer camp registrations (in blue) from Robert R. Brown campers (in orange). Traditional summer camp registrations peaked at 486 in 210, dropping to only 289 in 2010, a 40.5% drop.

The orange bars illustrate Robert R. Brown's overall impact on camp registrations. While Brown camp registrations remained relatively stable over the decade, it experienced a large drop in 2019. Robert R. Brown registrations began the decade with 112 registrations, but dropped to 83 in 2019, a 25.9% drop.

The turquoise line graph combines the two populations into one summer camp registrations total, to illustrate the total decline since 2010. Total registrations have declined by 226 campers, or 37.8% since 2010.

