

It's been a long time since St. Columba has been on the agenda at Convention, so I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you a little about how we began, bring you up to date on what we're doing now, and talk a bit about what we would like to do. I'm assuming most of you have been to St. Columba for one reason or another – if you haven't, you certainly need to do so because it is one of our diocese's greatest assets.

Jim Scheibler and his sister Bea Gerber bequeathed their family home – about 144 acres in Shelby County – to the Diocese of Tennessee in late 1965. The property was to be used to further the mission and work of the Protestant Episcopal Church and to accomplish that it could be developed into any number of things, including camps, parks, a school, a conference and retreat facility, and so on --- and it's use could be either religious or secular or both, but only on a non-profit basis.

Soon after the bequest was made Calvary Church formed a committee of 12 people and hired an Architectural and Planning firm to study the various options and determine what use would be most beneficial to the Church. I read their report the other day and you might be surprised to learn that their recommendation for the overall framework of the property, was to create a working farm, raising fruit, vegetables, cattle, sheep, and chickens. The report includes specific instructions – for instance, they planned to hire a caretaker to oversee things with, and I quote, “the Episcopal clergy and laymen assisting the caretaker. And though the farm should not lose money, its essential purpose is to entice the Episcopal community into participating...for a sense of humility.... and to benefit the spirit.”

I can see us all out there now - milking the cows - with Bishop Johnson taking the lead!!! But that's not all – they also recommended building a boys' boarding school, a church, and a retreat center on the farm. I think we can all be grateful that their bucolic dream remained a dream and instead they wisely made the decision to build a retreat and conference center for our diocese.

Vander Horst Pavilion was the first structure built on the property - and Scheibler Lodge followed in 1981. The first groups to use St. Columba were vestries and E.C.W.s. and youth groups - summer day camps were organized a few years later. Tim Sloan can tell us more about those days since he was on the Center's first Board of Directors – or Charlie Chavis who served as Board Chair for 18 years. We continue to host those same groups, though in larger numbers, as well as many more that have discovered the hospitality at St. Columba.

For instance, most of the B&C meetings are held there, as well as activities and meetings organized by Emmanuel Center, Bridges, and Trezevant Manor;

Holy Apostles books the Center for their annual parish family weekend, but they've grown so much I don't know if we have enough room for them any more.

And spiritual retreats are growing in numbers and popularity – like the women’s group formed by Mimsy Jones - St. Clare Retreats – they’ve held 10 monthly silent retreats each year for the past 6 years - and they’ve now taken over the former Calvary ECW annual weekend silent retreat.

Last year, over 2,000 of us from at least 15 of our parishes participated in one or more of the many Episcopal programs held at St. Columba. 170 of our communicants attended a vestry retreat. 700 took part in programs such as family weekends, prayer groups, guilds, silent retreats, planning groups and more. 590 diocesan youth attended our youth events, (61 were there just last weekend for Happening). And we had 600 campers and counselors for summer day camp. In addition, about 3,400 people attended non-Episcopal events last year.

At the end of camp last summer, we asked some of the campers and counselors to write about what St. Columba means to them and one word kept coming up – the same word we often hear from many who attend our various retreats – and that word is sanctuary. For many, St. Columba offers a refuge from the daily distractions of our modern world; a safe place for contemplation, learning, and renewal.

Or, as long-time camper Andrew Street, wrote:

“In the 10 years that I have attended EDC, one theme has traveled with me everywhere I went; the notion that through our play (laughter) and worship, we form a bodily sanctuary within ourselves, a safe place to express love and care towards one another without worry. And through this sanctuary, we bring together the diocese into a playful setting, coupled with worship and spiritual growth. Part of the sanctuary “theme” is the part of the week in which everyone sits together and just listens to nature. This helped me in particular to really feel my surroundings, and ultimately realize that God is ever-present in our minds, spirits, and in our own sanctuary as well.”

Sanctuary - that is the gift, the true asset, of St. Columba.

So what do we need to do to insure the future of this sanctuary?

The Board of Directors learned two things soon after Scheibler Lodge opened its doors. One was that we needed a larger facility and second that, in order to make St. Columba available to everyone in the Diocese at an affordable rate, then it would be essential to generate other, non-Episcopal, non-profit business.

Right now, Scheibler Lodge is aged and in need of repair and updating. Our current facility does not meet today’s expectations for lodging (particularly the fact that there is not an en suite bathroom for each room), nor is it big enough to accommodate the business that is already available and necessary for the Center to stay viable. There are

only 20 bedrooms in the Lodge; we need to be able to house at least 100 adults. The Board has explored retrofitting Scheibler Lodge but found that it is not feasible, neither financially nor in the resulting changes being able to meet our real needs. And so for at least the past 12 years the Board has worked with architects on different expansion options.

We need a larger facility that meets the needs of today's conference participants for several reasons – one, for improved housing, meeting, and dining spaces for our own diocesan use; second, so that we can generate more business that will allow us to offer these improved facilities to our parishes at a reasonable rate; and finally so that we can hire a fulltime core staff that will enable us to offer more program and retreat opportunities for all Episcopalians in West Tennessee.

With more and better space, we will be able to host some of our own diocesan groups and events that have too many people for us to accommodate now – such as: Diocesan clergy conference, Diocesan convention; more Bridges programs; family retreats and youth retreats sponsored by our larger parishes

With a new facility, St. Columba can truly become a Center not only for diocesan-wide events but for regional and national ones as well. Our location and potential resources will draw neighboring Episcopalians to join our diocese for programs such as:

- + Continuing education for clergy and the lay employees of our churches
- + Vestry training
- + Congregational growth and development workshops
- + Pastoral care ministries and various lay ministries training

And, of course, spiritual retreats.

There are large national groups that have approached us in the past but were too big for us to handle; groups like CREDO; the Alban Institute, the Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers Directors; United Methodist groups; and Cumberland Presbyterian national groups; Some of these have already expressed interest in booking conferences when we build an expanded facility.

And increased business will also generate the revenue that will allow us to improve and expand our camps and programs for various youth groups, including our current summer camp program for at-risk children from the inner city.

Like the group who undertook the study to determine the best use of the Scheibler's gift, we are dreaming big dreams. We know, however, that these dreams can become a reality that will both preserve St. Columba as our Sanctuary and allow St. Columba to continue its role as a true outreach ministry of our diocese.