

Emrich Retreat Center at Parishfield



After months of preparation, Emrich Retreat Center reopened for business July 15. Diocesan Council gave the go ahead last spring for Emrich to open for a one-season trial. Faithful former guests lined up to return, along with new patrons, and the facility is booked every weekend through the scheduled closing date in November.

Even before the end of the trial season, Emrich's Interim Advisory Board (formerly the Emrich Visioning Committee) returned to Diocesan Council on September 12 and tipped its hand on a plan to reopen.

Christ Church, Dearborn, tithe creates Emrich fund

At its meeting on September 12, Diocesan Council approved a new fund called the Emrich Facilities Maintenance Fund for the ongoing renewal and development of the Emrich Retreat Center in Brighton. A gift from Christ Church, Dearborn, for \$20,668 launched the new fund. Christ Church received a bequest from the estate of Earl Bergeron. It is a policy and practice of Christ Church when the church receives a gift to give 10 percent to the diocesan ministries.

Diocesan Council considered several options before deciding to start a fund to which others could contribute.

by Karen D. Bota

The answer is “Definitely yes,” said Andrea Morrow, member of St. John’s, Clinton, and chair of the interim board who also helps out with administration and marketing. “There is interest in people coming to Emrich. Several people have said, ‘To us, it feels like home.’”

“Lots of groups are asking us to reopen in April,” Morrow added. “We’ve heard from groups that they’d like to get on our [2010 and 2011] calendar now.”

After months of preparation by volunteers—scraping and painting, fixing windows and roofs, pulling up old carpet and putting

down new floors, installing new wiring and plumbing, as well as landscaping and planting the G3 Garden (see *The Record*, August 2009)—Emrich was made “more user-friendly, more family- and kid-friendly, and it supports larger groups,” said Joseph Cospito. A member of St. John’s, Plymouth, and the Emrich interim board, Cospito serves as project manager and volunteer coordinator. “It’s a diamond for the diocese. Our goal is to have the diocese use it more.”

In addition to improvements to the physical plant, there have been changes to staffing and to financial oversight of the center. Administrative Coordinator Shari Spencer is the lone paid staff member. Spencer oversees the facility, takes reservations and manages guest matters, and sends payments to the finance office at the Diocesan Center, where bills are paid and financial accounting is maintained for Emrich. There is no longer a separate board; Diocesan Council makes decisions about Emrich with advice from the interim board for the time being.

“It’s a different type of model, more integrated with the diocese,

because it is owned by and is part of the diocese, and it should be accountable to the diocese,” said Morrow. “[Previously] the board had a separate bank account and did very little reporting to the diocese, so the diocese didn’t have any idea of the financial situation.”

Thanks to all the volunteer labor this year, preparing and running the center has been accomplished with the staff of one. “It’s a little too lean of a model,” Morrow admitted. “Our paid staffing might need to go a little higher next year.”

And there should be a next year, Morrow is convinced. A recent meeting with Sara Winter, daughter of Gibson Winter, who co-founded the Parishfield community in 1948 on the site of what is now Emrich, confirmed that the interim board’s vision is on the right track.

“What excites people is the sense of community—the sense of place, of sustainability, of commitment to the environment and to the larger community around there. These are big topics in spirituality right now,” said Morrow. “Emrich is coming back as a place with deep spiritual

roots and the importance of nature, of finding community, to be refreshed to go forth to do what they are doing—like Parishfield was.”

Kris Davis, a long-time Emrich user and supporter from Advent Episcopal Church, West Bloomfield, couldn't wait to come back. “I cried when I heard it closed,” she said.

Davis, who came to Emrich with *De Colores* and *Cursillo* for 16 years—sometimes four times a year—calls the center “God space.”

“It's a comfortable place, not a five-star hotel, but that doesn't matter when you look at the fact that you are in the middle of nature. There is so much about Emrich that made me who I am today,” Davis said.

“The people who come appreciate that Emrich is imbued with a sense of history with people coming there for years,” agreed Morrow. “The kind of love and commitment to the place that people have shown at volunteer days has been amazing and heartwarming. It was a great experience to work with people who have fond memories of the place.

“We've been calling it the ‘Emrich Retreat Center at Parishfield’ since we reopened,” said Morrow.

At its September 12 meeting, Diocesan Council gave the interim board permission to take reservations for the 2010 season.

“What I am seeing is an ownership that was lacking in both Emrich and Gordonwood,” Bishop Gibbs told Diocesan Council. By that comment, he explained that the maintenance and support of retreat and conference centers are not sustained solely by the people who frequent them but everyone in the diocese.

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Planting new models of being Church

by Karen D. Bota
Sara Winter was 4 when she moved to the Parishfield Community, now the site of the Emrich Retreat Center. She was just 11 when she and her family moved away. But indelible lessons, gathered from living in a community based on faith and equality, followed her.



Sara Winter

Now an independent filmmaker and part-time teacher at the New School in New York who lives in Hoboken, NJ, Winter is writing a book about the history of Parishfield, a place ahead of its time.

The story begins when Richard S. Emrich, the seventh bishop of the Diocese of Michigan, bought property in Brighton in 1947. Bishop Emrich dreamed of a place that would strengthen the ministry of the laity and serve as a center for Church renewal. He brought in Gibson Winter, Frances Ayres, Hugh White, and their families to flesh out this new ministry.

“The idea was that it would be an ongoing community based on worship, study, work, and recreation,” said Sara Winter, articulating the priorities of Parishfield. “The day was divided that way, and these activities involved any groups studying there and the staff. There was inclusiveness.”

Separate houses and households were maintained by the Winterses, Ayreses, and Whites. “It was not about three families living in a communal setting,” Winter said. “It was about an adult community experience built on the four principles. Staff and groups stepped into this stream, and were swept into the current of this lifestyle.”

While the children didn't participate in much of the day, recreation was open to all. “It was really fun,” Winter recalled. “We played volleyball, baseball, went tobogganing. Sometimes we'd have parties or play charades, which we called The Game.”

On the downside, she also remembers the long ride on the school bus to Brighton Elementary School, where Winter and her brother were the first ones on and the last ones off. “I remember we were trying to have a lemonade stand or a potholder stand. No one drove by on our road. It was sad.”

Although Parishfield was adult-focused, the challenges of living in community were not lost on young Sara Winter. “How do people have a shared vision that overrides their personal differences? You have a task or a program and you fight, you disagree about it. But the vision is bigger than the personality,” Winter said. “I just grew up with that concept, and that has been really valuable to me. It affected the kids, too. We'd fight and say, ‘wait a minute, that's the only kid I have to play with.’”



Sara Winter, girl behind pigs, at Parishfield

Faith was central to the community. “We had some tiny function as kids, but ours was a very strong faith because it was not set outside, like going to church on Sunday. That is how I've grown up,” said Winter. There was much interest in the mystical tradition and spirituality, and it was very present in that place, she added.

Parishfield's involvement with the Episcopal Church, the international ecumenical movement, and in religious study and debate was also key. Theologians from around the world came to Parishfield to live and study. “It's why the community never turned inward or became self-absorbed. We were part of the church in the abstract.”

Everyone's views were heard and valued—lay and ordained, men and women—and women in particular developed this non-hierarchical way of life. “I had a voice,” Winter recalled her mother saying. Even the pay was egalitarian. “Mary White was paid the same as her husband. They had a legal paper that gave them all equal shares in the property, before it was all handed back to the diocese.”

Deaconess Olive Robinson, an imposing figure who served as vicar of St. Stephen's, Hamburg, from 1952 until she retired in 1968, frequently came to Parishfield. Bishop Robert DeWitt was also very much part of the community. Winter observed that there are some who draw a trajectory from his early involvement in Parishfield to his role in the “irregular” ordination of the “Philadelphia 11” in 1974, two years before ordaining women was authorized by General Convention.

“I grew up surrounded by women doing these things—my mother, Mrs. Ayres, Robin [Deaconess Robinson], women who came to study there,” Winter said. “It so affected me in terms of role models. I was angry when Dad said we were leaving [in 1956, when he accepted a position at the University of Chicago].”

The hope was that people would go back to their own churches empowered and implement that sense of community in their own setting. “Now they had a voice, and could talk about how they'd grown theologically from the discussions,” Winter said.