



Views from

# the hermitage

*Creating an environment of attentiveness to God*

The lead stories in "Views" this year will be a series of historical reflections by friends of The Hermitage. Our first contributor is Willard Roth, friend of The Hermitage from before its establishment in Michigan. He writes: "I count Gene Herr as a friend spanning six decades plus. We met as teenagers on a summer mission in Mark Twain's home town in Missouri where Gene's late night prayers were a spiritual challenge to an Iowa dairyman's son.

## The Hermitage Story:

### *Vision Yields to History*

The Hermitage seed implanted in the genes and jeans of one Lancaster County truck farmer's nephew germinated slowly. Pennsylvania harvest seasons came and went; decade followed decade. The man married a woman from Ohio. They moved west to Indiana and Kansas and Arizona. They raised two sons and a daughter. The dream for a quiet place in the country somewhere on God's earth where servant pilgrims could *pray and listen* kept beckoning. In the fullness of time seeds germinated and sprouts pushed through the soil of St. Joseph County in southern Michigan. "This is the place. This is the Hermitage in the country," agreed Gene and Mary on a sunny day in 1984.

Like most stories, the pace of telling the Hermitage story moves much faster than the speed at which events unfolded. Herbert Eugene and Mary Yutzy Herr chose discipling young people in the Jesus way as their lifelong priority. They modeled rather than preached. They determined to earn the right to be heard. Whether congregational pastors, denominational staffers, or program directors, they majored in listening rather than speaking.

Pivotal in working out the Hermitage vision was their experience with The Discipleship Program in Phoenix 1977-82. As part of Mennonite Church Voluntary Service, Gene and Mary tirelessly invested themselves as mentors to scores of young adults in Christian formation. As they reflected on their learning, they calculated that what was good for the younger might be worthwhile for those older as well. They moved back to Indiana. They bought a home in *the city with a heart*. In Church of the Savior style of mission group, Gene issued a call to friends in January 1983: I am beginning a small retreat place in our home. We call this work and place "The Hermitage."

A November 1984 Mission Group letter from *the hermitage*, 2511 Frances Avenue, Elkhart, Indiana, used a transitional slogan: *a place to pray and listen in the city...in the country*. Gene and Mary began a May 1985 letter to friends, "We bought a 64 acre place in Michigan. Twenty-one acres are being farmed. The rest is homestead and rolling hills, ponds and trees. Eric Haarer (a Phoenix Discipleship alumnus) has lived at the farm these months creating two rooms in the barn. Our first retreat was there on Good Friday." The ivory letterhead carried a crucifix logo with a simple tagline: *a place to tend the soils and seeds of servanthood*.

Five months later they circulated an update "From the rolling countryside near Three Rivers, MI—a land of walnuts and deer and all kinds of stick-tight weeds. We have turned our modular home and the old barn floor into a place of home and hospitality. Already the barn has two graceful and simply-arranged guest rooms, and individual retreatants have been coming and going almost from the start. We have plans for remodeling the lower floor of the sturdy bank barn. By mid-November we hope to have sleeping room for four persons. A larger center for eating, meeting, library, and prayer, will, we hope, be in some formative condition before Christmas."

The letter also explained that the Indiana name was moving with them to Michigan. "When we checked Webster, we knew the name should stay: a secluded residence or private retreat; a hideaway. In call we are more 'hermitage' than anything else." They continued, "Our belief, born of experience, is that the ministries of Christ's disciples need to be formed out of words of scripture heard in silence. We are here to provide a setting of support and companionship for those who are ready to study and pray and open their lives to growth in biblical servanthood."

The January 1986 newsletter reported, "Articles of Incorporation have been filed in the state of Michigan (January 6). Our legal name is The Hermitage Community, Inc. Our Board of Directors, in their first meeting December 15, chose Don Troyer, president; Joan Y. Miller, secretary, and Mary Herr, treasurer. Other board members are J. Kent Borgaard, William Bullard, Virginia Esch, Eugene Herr, Dorothy McCammon, Willard Roth and Maynard Weaver." Like a tenderly tended garden, vision gradually gives way to history.

—Willard A. Roth

## Lent Quiet Day Retreat:

### *Praying in the Desert*

Quiet Day retreats will be held this Lenten season on Saturday, February 27 and Monday, March 8. Join us for a guided day of prayer with the Desert Fathers and Mothers led by Naomi Wenger. We begin at 9:00am with Morning Prayer and conclude by 3:00pm. Suggested donation for the day: \$50 (includes lunch). We gratefully receive what you are able to give. Overnight stays before or after the retreat can be accommodated. Reserve your space for one of these days, 269-244-8696 or [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org).

## Phoenix Gallery Welcomes Mark Goertzen

The Phoenix Gallery is open again with an exhibit of wood-fired pottery created by potter Mark Goertzen. The pots will be on view through the Lenten season (exhibit ends March 31). Titling his offering "Of the Earth," Mark links his early formation on a family farm in Kansas to his vocation as potter. He says, "relatively recently...It came to me that my full-time work is dealing with earth, as my family's work is." He also connects with plants as he needs to harvest many trees to fire his outdoor kiln to 2500° and hold that temperature for thirty hours. The pots are mostly unglazed, allowing for the wood ash to melt into the surface of the pot creating unique unplanned designs on each one. Mark delights that the beauty "in the variation ... I could never have thought of. Like a farmer who plants a seed in the ground I do my best to make the conditions right for success but it is never totally up to me."

Visit the Phoenix Gallery in the lower level of the Ken Hanby Center from 9:00am to 5:00 pm Monday–Saturday. Call 269-244-8696 for more information.

## Icon Writing Retreat

We are hosting an Icon Writing Retreat led by iconographer, Donna Rathert, April 9-14. No prior experience of icon writing is needed. This retreat will explore the mystery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Each participant will create an icon in commu-

nity with others who keep silence together in an attitude of attentiveness to God. Regular periods of prayer will punctuate the silence. For more information about the retreat, contact Donna at 269-244-1601 or [DRRathert@hotmail.com](mailto:DRRathert@hotmail.com). Cost for the retreat is \$425 (in-residence at The Hermitage) or \$345 (commuter). A \$50 deposit is due by 3/31/10. To register, contact The Hermitage, 269-244-8696 or [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org).

## Twenty-Fifty Anniversary Celebration

**August 6-8, 2010**

Celebrate with us this summer! Join us for all three days or a few hours.

- Begin with a Retreat Day with Fr. Eric Haarer on the Feast of the Transfiguration, **Friday, August 6 from 9am–4pm**.
- We will focus on the birth, growth and continuation of the Hermitage Community on **Saturday, August 7 from 9am–8pm**. Gene and Mary Herr will be on hand to share memories of the early days. You can include your memories in an oral history project and make Blackberry jam and bread.
- **Sunday, August 8 from 10am–2pm** will include Taizé worship, Communion, a Prayer Walk and more time for fellowship.

We are taking reservations for this event now. Those wishing to stay overnight are encouraged to reserve early. Contact: 269-244-8696 or [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org).

## Building Progress

Thank you to all who have helped fund the renovation of the Barn and the finishing of the apartment in the Ken Hanby Center lower level. Construction has begun on the apartment this winter while the Barn project is on hold for more clement weather. We are accepting donations for the furnishing of the apartment and for painting the barn. We are over half-way to our fund-raising goal of \$60,000. As donations continue to come in, we will begin other needed improvements in the buildings.

## Single-minded in the Desert

Multi-tasking is a way of life for many of us. And yet, the simplicity of doing just one thing is appealing.

Back in the 3rd Century, men and women left their urban homes and settled in the desert to escape the bustle of city life and focus on just one thing: God. The Christian church was slowly becoming blasé as the Roman Emperors stopped killing Christians for their faith. In fact, it eventually became so fashionable to be a “Christian” that one could no longer tell the “true believers” from the “social” believers. Those who yearned for more of God and a slimmer social calendar ran to the desert, leaving behind their wealth, their families and even their respectability.

Perhaps the most famous of the desert Fathers and Mothers (as they came to be called out of respect for their single-minded devotion and holiness), is Antony of Egypt. He lived from about 251 to 356. His notoriety is due to Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who was so impressed by his devoted life that he wrote his biography. Athanasius’ tale continued to bear fruit into the late fourth century when Augustine of Hippo was converted from following the Manichaean sect to the worship of Christ partly because of this biography. Augustine was moved by the fact that Antony, who had just received an inheritance of a large family farm, heard the gospel story of the rich young ruler, and taking the words, “go, sell all you have and give to the poor and follow me,” to heart, Antony sold it all, reserving only enough of his estate to provide for a younger sister. After distributing his wealth to the poor, he moved to the outskirts of his village in the upper Nile region of Egypt and began to do manual labor, memorize the Scriptures and pray. Over time, he began to attract followers and a community of disciples followed him to a remote desert outpost. When the Diocletian persecution began, he moved to Alexandria, where he fed and nursed those who had been arrested for their faith and were waiting in prisons and mines for their final hour.

From this small beginning, scores of hermits fled to the deserts in the upper Nile of Egypt, the wilderness surrounding the Jordan River and to the

less wild but no less devoted monastic enclaves in Syria. What began as a solitary life of fasting, reciting scripture and prayer, became the communal foundation for modern monasticism.

The single-mindedness of these men and women attracts us to them today, despite huge cultural differences. For example, we might not understand the antics of Simeon the Stylite, who lived atop a 20 foot pillar without coming down for 30 years, preaching and reciting scripture aloud all day and praying all night. We might be repulsed by monks who burned their fingers off in order to avoid acting out their lustful inclinations. But what we understand and long for is their single-hearted and single-minded devotion. We desire the simplicity of purpose and action that would allow us to spend our lives focusing on one thing—God.

-Naomi Wenger

### The Hermitage Calendar

- Feb 27 Lent Quiet Day, 9-3
- Mar 8 Lent Quiet Day, 9-3  
Mar 14 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm
- Apr 9-14 Icon Writing Retreat—  
Donna Rathert, presenter  
11 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm
- May 9 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm
- Jun 4-6 Storytelling in Fabric—  
Beth Ann Williams and June  
Mears Driedger, presenters  
Jun 13 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm
- Jul 11 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm
- Aug 6-8 25th Anniversary◀  
Aug 6 Feast of the Transfiguration-Fr. Eric Haarer, 9-3  
Aug 7 Hermitage Community  
Celebration, Jam and  
Bread, 9-8  
Aug 8 Taizé Worship 10 am
- Sep 12 Taizé Evensong, 7 pm

### The Word Alone

[God said to Elijah], "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him...

I Kings 19:11-13a

### the hermitage Mission

As Jesus was revitalized for being about his Father's business by periodic withdrawal to retreat and prayer, so The Hermitage seeks in its mission:

- To be a prayer community, available as a place of spiritual formation where scripture, silence, nature, group experiences, and personal companionship are cultivated elements of retreat.
- To provide a guesthouse away from daily tasks where pastors and other pilgrims can deepen their call and relationship with God, be refreshed in their whole person and be revitalized by the presence and promise of Christ.

(from The Hermitage Rule)


**Resident Community:** David & Naomi Wenger, co-directors  
**Board of Directors:** Mary Asmonga-Knapp, Allan Martling (chair), Natala Mohl, Cheryl Nakata, Biff Weidman, David Wenger, Naomi Wenger

## Taizé Services: Second Sundays at Seven



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