



# views from the hermitage

*Creating an environment of attentiveness to God*



## Lent Retreat 2020 - “Give me a drink”

Using texts from Exodus and the Gospel of John, we will explore our need for clean water - spiritually and physically - and the implications of thirst for keeping attuned to the call of God. Join us for a day of quiet reflection, fresh water to drink from our well (no factory filtering needed), and an exploration of scripture, poetry and your inner being.

When: Saturday, March 7, 2020,  
9am - 3pm  
Where: Gathering Room, The Hermitage  
Facilitator: Naomi Wenger  
Suggested Donation: \$75, includes lunch  
Register: Call 269.244.8696  
[contact@hermitagecommunity.org](mailto:contact@hermitagecommunity.org)



## Whole and Holy: 2020 EcoTheology Retreats By Naomi R. Wenger

In 2020, the Ecosystems Discernment Committee (EDC) of the Hermitage Board will host three day-long retreats focusing on the theological implications of caring for Earth. In his 2016 encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis declares that, “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.” In the midst of a climate crisis and the immense damage that humans have done to our Earth home, we must learn first that we are one with Earth and that it is “good” so that we can properly care for it. From mass extinctions to rising carbon saturation of the atmosphere, we are implicated in some fairly big problems. But, as Pope Francis reminds us, there is another view, one that can rightfully motivate us to action on behalf of the planet. *If we treat the place where we live as holy, we are already on the way to participating in its healing and wholeness.* As Christ-followers, our work on

## A House Made of Sky

By David Wenger

When did we begin this journey in building the new staff house? Was it February 2017 when we contacted Thomas Hirsch, a Michigan builder using natural building methods? Or was it in 20013 when Enbridge installed a new and larger oil pipeline on Hermitage land in to keep up with the increased need for oil? In protest we resolved to reduce our dependence on oil, thus our interest in natural building methods. Perhaps it was as far back as 1985 in the founder's vision for a resident community to serve the retreat community.

Whether it's been three years or 35 years, the time is now for the house to rise up from the ground. We are working with two builders, Karry Hostetler of Hostetler Construction and Thomas Hirsch of Bungalow Builders. On January 30 we held a pre-construction meeting with all builders, subcontractors, and the Hermitage property committee when we shared our vision for building a house made of sky. How does one build a house made of sky? By combining materials that grow with sunshine, rain, and soil, and using them to build a house. We may have to make compromises by using materials that are manufactured and possibly toxic. However, **our guiding vision is to build a house made of sky.**

Currently, we are selectively harvesting white pines from the pine stand to be milled into siding for the new house. In March, foundation work will begin followed by framing of the exterior walls. Once the wall framing is complete in mid-May we can begin building the walls. **Save the dates, May 18-30, 2020 for the wall stuffing party**, otherwise known as work days when we pack the 12-inch thick wall forms with clay-straw mix. More opportunities for helping and learning this new old way of building will be forthcoming. One our building mentors says that we are not building *buildings*, we are building *builders*. Let's become builders together this year.

**Mark your calendars: May 18-30 for the wall stuffing!**

To volunteer on the building project please contact David Wenger ([david@hermitagecommunity.org](mailto:david@hermitagecommunity.org)).☞

## 2019 Year-in-Review

By Kevin Driedger

2019 was a bountiful year at The Hermitage. What follows is a quick summary of what happened.

### *Retreatants*

- We hosted nearly 750 guests for more than 1500 days of retreats.
- Grand Rapids, Goshen/Elkhart, and Chicago and suburbs are the home to many of our guests.
- We hosted nearly 40 group retreats which lasted between a few hours in the morning to five days.
- Many guests came to The Hermitage for the first time this year often referred by a pastor, friend, or colleague. We also have guests who find us online.
- Some guests come a few times each month and some guests returned after an absence of ten or even 25 years.

### *Events*

- Our annual Lent, Advent, and Feast of the Transfiguration retreats were very popular. These retreats and more are planned for 2020.
- A newer part of the Hermitage rhythm has been gathering quarterly with our neighborhood "contemplative communities." We gather with area retreat centers and other contemplative groups to discuss issues that affect our operations and areas of collaboration.
- New signage was installed on the trail to St. Gregory's Abbey.
- Roger, our library volunteer, completed a major project cleaning up our library collection and adding all the materials to a computer catalog.

### *Staff and Board*

- We expanded staff with Kim and Ursula helping with laundry, cooking, and cleaning. Scott worked with cleaning and yard work in the summer.
- June was on-leave for five months with health concerns but is now back at work.
- The Hermitage board provided ongoing leadership and support with extra energy going to raise support for the new house and plan the construction of the new house.
- We said farewell to Margie Pfeil who was board chair and completed her second term. We eagerly welcome new board members Jane Stoltzfus Buller, and Jayna and Robert Gallagher.☞

## The Bowing Tree: Conservation Gospel

by Naomi Wenger

There's a tree limb along the trail at The Hermitage that juts over the trail just at forehead height for me. For those taller, it might be neck height and some might be able to skim just under the branch without touching. Many times I've heard the suggestion that the branch should be cut. It is just too inconvenient, or someone might be hurt by it. The first objection to the tree branch is certainly true, it is inconvenient, in a way. The second observation may also have some merit, but as the average human walking speed is three miles per hour, it is not very likely that serious injury will result.

Every time I hear the suggestion to cut that limb, I demur. Partly because I love trees and their various forms are beautiful to me. I have also come to delight in that particular branch. It reminds me of some truths of which I need to be continually reminded.

As I enter the woods at that place in the trail, I must duck below the branch—I bow. That physical movement reminds me that I bow before the life of the woods. I don't stride into the forest, master of it all, able to cut at whim. Though it is true, I could do that, I choose, by leaving that tree branch there, to acknowledge the tree and the forest as existing without my permission or intervention.

I do not make trees. I do not make them grow. And, I do not make them with limbs that grow horizontally over a pathway. I am not the creature who spins sunlight into sugar. I do not provide homes for birds, squirrels, raccoons, insects and fungi. I have none of those special gifts. But, the tree does. In bowing as I enter the woods, I remember to respect all living things in this space—especially

the tree with the jutting branch which does such important work.

If I bow as I leave the woods, I am reminded to be thankful for the gifts that a walk in the woods has given me. I have inhaled the healing air that the trees exhale. I have heard the wind in the canopy, the rat-a-tat of a wood pecker, the song of a wood frog or a bird. I have seen the emerald green of moss peeking through a mound of



snow. I have marveled at the different kinds of fungus that grow on dead and dying trees. I have watched a pair of ducks take off from the swamp. I may have glimpsed three deer bounding away from the path. I see the architecture of bushes and trees—noting their strength and graceful beauty. I may have tasted the sweetness of the blackberries that line the trail. I may have pulled some sassafras shoots to take home for my morning tea. Or I might have found a brilliant yellow feather from a goldfinch

on the path. There are so many riches to take away from my walk in the woods. So, I bow in gratitude as I leave. Grateful to the God who made all of these things that I can enjoy—even the tree with the jutting branch.

As I reflect on my humanness and that my usual inclination would be to “clear the path, make it easy and comfortable,” I am reminded that having to bow because of another creature is good spiritual practice. It is a practice that leads to a natural humility. I have enough practices in my life that counter a humble position. I defend myself when others point out that I'm wrong or that my way of thinking is only one of the ways one might think about an issue. So, to bow in order to enter a woodland, I am reminded that there is variety here, that there is more than one way to think about trails. I bow as a gesture of humility toward all that is not me. I bend to make room for other creatures to be as they are made to be.

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In the letter to the Romans, Paul exhorts Christians to “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think” (Romans 12:3). I need a regular reminder of that injunction. Thank you, tree, for helping me remember my place in Creation is to be “with” not “over” all that is here with me.

The tree and its branch also help me remember that I bear the image of God. But, this image can so often be marred in me by my trying to grasp a “greater place.” In the Hymn of Kenosis in the beginning of Philippians 2, the writer reminds us: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself” (Philippians 2:3–8).

This “emptied” quality in God is the quality that can show forth as God’s image in me. Can I walk in the wood as an emptied creature, letting the tree have its natural form? Or, do I need to change the form of the tree to suit my desires? There are good reasons to cut trees, trim branches, remove shrubs, pull weeds, or reform a landscape. But, each time I bow to enter the woods on the trail, here, I am reminded to ask the questions rather than to assume that I know best or that my desire should naturally take precedence over the form of the tree.

A neighbor reminds me to “ask the tree, it will tell you what it needs.” To some, that may seem weirdly reminiscent of a fairy tale. But, I think what she means, in part, is that trees will tell us what they need by the way they grow and that if we listen to that “voice” we can learn both what

the tree needs and what we may be able to give up for the sake of the tree. I live on this planet with all of the creatures God made to be here—large and small. My work is to listen to what God has made and so live at peace with all of Creation.

So, I will listen to the tree and be grateful for the lessons of humility and “God-bearing.” Each time I enter or leave the woods by the tree with the jutting limb, I will remember that in bowing, I bow to the whole intricate mass of created things, and even more, to their Creator.☞



(Continued from page 1)

We invite you to come and explore with us the ecological and theological framework for tending and keeping Earth (Genesis 2:15), and examine our resistances to act on behalf of our planet.

**The first retreat**, “God in Deep Time: ‘Showing Mercy to the Thousandth Generation,’” will be held on *Holy Saturday, April 11*. During this day we will introduce the concept of Deep Time ecology and link that to the eternal nature of God. We will also spend time lamenting for Earth and confessing our complicity in its mis-use.

**The second retreat**, “God as Wholeness: ‘All Creation Groans,’” will be on the Summer Solstice, *June 20*. This day will focus on the Unity of God and God’s work in Creation, including but not limited to humans. We will examine the human responsibility to care for the “poor of the Earth.” We will also spend some time working in the garden.

**The final retreat** is a Harvest Fest on *October 31* with the theme, “God as Presence: ‘Look at the Fig Tree.’” We will experience one of the natural cycles of Earth and look for harvests and harvesters among the creatures of Earth. By noticing our micro-environment, we will gain insight into the big picture of caring for Earth. We will also experience Nature as Word of God (the “God said” of Genesis 1). We may also harvest some of the bounty from the garden and eat from the abundance of the land.☞

## UP CLOSE WITH VOLUNTEERS

**1) What is your name and where do you live?** Nancy Boyd and I reside in Three Rivers.

**2) How did you learn about The Hermitage?** Over 20 years ago I was introduced to the Hermitage by a pastor friend, while Gene and Mary Herr were still there.

**3) What do you do as a volunteer?** As a volunteer I have done cleaning at the Hermitage after reading on the sacredness of cleaning as a spiritual practice. Various reasons caused me to find other ways of volunteering in this sacred space.

I have done baking at the Hermitage for some years now. This year my granddaugh-

ter Hannah Roberts and I came together to bake for guests. This began as a volunteer project for National Honor Society for Hannah, yet it became so much more. Introducing her to this peaceful, sacred site was a wonderful experience for both of us. Today, I most often bake and deliver something every two weeks for incoming guests as they are being served meals.

**4) What draws you to volunteer?** Volunteering for the Hermitage is motivated by my deep, abiding love for this holy space. Upon entering the drive, my soul begins to find respite. The Hermitage has fed me spiritually in various ways for many years. It is a regular part of my spiritual practice.

**5) What is one thing you want people to know about The Hermitage?** I could not imagine my day-to-day life without benefit of spending time, retreating or volunteering, at this sacred space. It has become a way for me to serve Christ and others as they come to find spiritual rest and spiritual growth. ☞



### Deepest Thanks

The Hermitage thrives due to the generous help of our volunteers. If you sense God's nudging to volunteer, please contact Kevin to offer your time and skills: [Kevin@hermitagecommunity.org](mailto:Kevin@hermitagecommunity.org)

We are grateful to:

**Ned Arnold** - bookkeeping and creating financial reports;

**Nancy Boyd** - for keeping our freezer stocked with tasty desserts for our guests;

**Jay Budde** - for his continued work on the new house;

**Janae Hall** - hosting so all staff could participate in the November board meeting;

**Larry and Judy Somers** - making sure we are always stocked with water and granola;

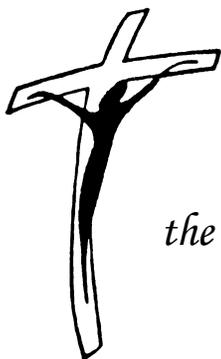
**Benjamin and Simone Tennant** - hosting during the January board retreat and meeting;

**Roger zum Felde** - for near weekly library work;

All who assisted putting the garden to bed for the winter.

Lastly, and continuously, we are grateful for **all the board members** who carry many tasks for The Hermitage year-round. ☞





*the hermitage*

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## Creating an environment of attentiveness to God

### Retreating at The Hermitage

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As Jesus was revitalized for begin 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 the 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.

If you would like to join us for retreat of any length, contact us by phone: 269-244-8696, email: [contact@hermitagecommunity.org](mailto:contact@hermitagecommunity.org), or find us on the web: [www.hermitagecommunity.org](http://www.hermitagecommunity.org). We provide silence, solitude, spiritual direction, guided group retreats, space for groups to meet, community morning prayer, simple healthful food, walking trails, and a gentle atmosphere. You provide the willing spirit.

### Board of Directors

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Mary Asmonga-Knapp  
Deb Borst  
Jay Budde  
Jayna Gallagher  
Robert Gallagher  
Joel Hogan  
Lynda Hollinger-Janzen  
Jeff Miller  
Darrell Paulsen  
Jane Stoltzfus Buller

### *Resident Community*

David Wenger  
Naomi Wenger  
Kevin Driedger  
June Mears Driedger