

SECTION G

OHIO CONFERENCE

REV. JOHN GANTT,
INTERIM OHIO CONFERENCE MINISTER

OUTDOOR MINISTRIES
www.journeythehills.org



I begin with gratitude for the leadership of Association Minister Dan Busch, persons who have served in various capacities to guide the Northwest Ohio Association of the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ, and the congregations and individuals who have found a multitude of ways to celebrate the fullness of our covenant to be one in faith and ministry.

Old Testament prophet Jeremiah encouraged Israel's Babylonian exiles to "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce..... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you ... and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (see Jeremiah 29:5-7 for the full text). In other words, keep on keeping on!

The passage makes me wonder if the church we used to know it is in exile, and while we keep on keeping on with what we treasure, we must also make our way into a new future.

A daunting and difficult journey for today is transition from church as an institution back to church as a mission movement. Recovery of vitality and effectiveness depends on recognizing how far we have moved away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the cultural captivity of church.

Recognizing that challenge, the Ohio Conference Board of Directors is focused on efforts to imagine a new Conference –finding ways to be the church we are meant to be. The structures we stubbornly guarded for 50+ years no longer serve us well. The sad but inevitable decision to concentrate Outdoor Ministry programming in one campsite instead of two is also part of that focus. So is the declaration that Faith Formation is a Conference-wide value, with Outdoor Ministry being but one piece of the Faith Formation challenge. A 2018 goal is to craft a Conference-wide Faith Formation plan. Underneath it all is the realization that OCWM is no longer an effective model for financial support of the UCC. New funding styles are required.

In spite of our discomfort, we have already seen immense change take place in our Associations and Conference. Case in point is to recognize there remain only two professional staff persons in Association/ Conference administration who were in office when the current interim Conference Ministry position began October, 2016. Two Associations now petition to be considered one. Another Association is served by a part time Association Pastor while other Association functions are assigned to six very part time persons.

Listening sessions are underway designed to examine experiences and gather insight for imagining a different way to be the United Church of Christ in Northern Kentucky, W. Virginia and Ohio, and how to energize Outdoor Ministry.

The church in this region is working to discover what it means to be a mission movement rather than a struggling institution. The quest is to recover and rebuild around covenant, collaboration and community. In the process it is a good thing for us to remember well the full title of who we are: the Northwest Ohio Association, of the Ohio Conference, of the United Church of Christ.

Leadership for that journey is an ominous task. The Ohio Conference Board of Directors is searching for the best available Transitional Conference Minister to skillfully and prayerfully resource the church in this region to become the church we are called to be.

I am grateful to have been part of that journey. In the process I have enjoyed renewed and new relationships with congregations, members and friends in Northwest Ohio Association. Thank you! May we depend on the Spirit of the loving and gracious God for our courage and wisdom as we journey toward tomorrow.

Shalom

- John M Gantt, Interim Conference Minister

It All Started with a Dog - Skipper Lodge at Templed Hills Camp

The summer church camping week at the Hamilton, Ohio YMCA camp — Camp Campbell Gard — was drawing to a close in the summer of 1951. The Reverend Michael J. Eckert, known as Rev. Mike, was the camp director. As was his custom on Thursday of the camp week, he would gather the camp staff and cabin counselors.

I was one of the counselors attending this meeting. As part of the discussion that day, Rev. Mike reported that in all probability this was the last summer for the church camp to be in this location. The YMCA was planning to use the camp site next year at this time for some other program. “Why don’t we have our own campsite?” people asked. After a brief response and discussion, we concluded the lack of funding and seeming lack of interest from area churches.

Early Saturday morning as we were gathering for breakfast, the manager of the YMCA camp approached me holding a dog. Skipper was the dog’s name, and the manager said that he didn’t want to take the dog back into the city. He wanted to know if a church camper would take the dog.

I took Skipper to my dad and said, “Dad, the manager wants to give this dog to a camper. I would like to auction off this dog to the highest bidder. The money from this auction could be used as seed money for our churches to buy property for our own church camp site.” He agreed and so, after breakfast, I brought the dog before the assembled campers and explained the reason for the auction.

“What am I bid?” I started. “Five dollars,” someone said. “Five, five, do I hear six? And so the bidding went until a camper called out, “I’ll bid \$40.00!” All was silent. “Going once, going twice, SOLD!” Skipper was sold to a young boy from Miamisburg, Ohio.

Some weeks later, the Camp Committees of the four Ohio Synods met. Rev. Mike gave his report of the summer camp at Camp Campbell Gard and told the story of the impromptu auction. He told of the enthusiasm and the desire for a church camp. After serious discussion, a motion was made to create a Church Camp Fund; each of four Synods pledged \$5,000 to start it. Word spread quickly throughout the Evangelical and Reformed Churches of Ohio, and additional money started to accumulate. Rev. Mike made arrangements to purchase a number of ceramic banks in the shape of a sitting dog. He put a tag with the name of Skipper on a chain around the necks. These were made available to churches, youth fellowships, women’s guilds, men’s brotherhoods, and other groups or people that requested them. The Skipper Fund was born.

That fall I started my first year at Heidelberg College. One fine day, my dad, Rev. Mike, called me and invited me to join an Ohio Church Camp group as they were going to walk a farm that was for sale. Located outside of Bellville, Ohio, an old deserted turkey farm was available and seemed to have possibilities that would be suitable for a church camp. The price was right and the site was purchased. Camp Templed Hills came into being. Several buildings on the farm were still usable. Constructed of chestnut lumber harvested from the farm itself, those buildings would stand for a long time. Cleaned and rearranged, they served as the offices and meeting rooms of the camp.

What was needed from the very beginning was a lodge. Using the Skipper Fund, churches began construction. Soon the building — Skipper Lodge — was completed. A board with a picture of Skipper was given to be placed in the lodge.

As remembered by Tom Eckert

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To reserve space for an event at Templed Hills, please contact the management organization – United Camps, Conferences and Retreats (UCCR) <http://www.uccr.org> at 800-678-5102 or reservations@uccr.org