

Lax ~ Merton Cottage for Civil Discourse*

Report to Mt. Irenaeus Board of Trustees

From: Joel Serra, project coordinator
To: Mount Irenaeus Board of Trustees
Re: Cottage for Civil Discourse
Meeting Date: September 16, 2023
CC.: Fr. Dan Riley, Br. Kevin Kriso, Mike Fenn, Dr. Timothy Shaffer

Origins.

At the invitation of Fr. Dan Riley, a group of supporters met at Mt. Irenaeus on April 14 – 15 to discuss creation of a Cottage for Civil Discourse. Since then, we have met as a large group and in sub-groups via zoom conference. The discussion grew out of a perception that America generally and university communities in particular are experiencing difficulty finding common ground to discuss important topical issues. Driven by deeply divided politics and social and mainstream media which frequently adopt vitriolic vocabulary and advocate intolerance, many individuals have become entrenched in their views, unable or unwilling to hear what others are saying. These divides are contrary to an atmosphere of academic discussion and debate which is seen as a critical element of collegiate life and suggest that students may not be prepared to take up the responsibilities of citizenship as graduates. For this reason, programs aimed at re-establishing skills for civil discourse have emerged at more than two-dozen universities and communities around the United States and Canada. The participants¹ believe there is a need for civil discourse programming which could serve St. Bonaventure and other institutions in the region.

Organization.

The Cottage for Civil Discourse exists as an informal project initiated by officers of Mt. Irenaeus and exists at the pleasure of the Board of Trustees and officers. There may come a point at which it is expedient for the Cottage to become a separate entity, but that decision will be the Board's and is not on the horizon.²

Teaching civil discourse is seen as a natural extension of the Mountain's Mission Statement and its Franciscan values. While we believe in the appropriateness of this project, we are also aware that there are other priorities and limited resources. We anticipate that the Board may determine that a pause to this project is necessary.

Programming: what is it that we will say?

The civil discourse group is blessed to have as a member Tim Shaffer, PhD an assistant professor at the Biden School for Public Policy at the University of Delaware. Together with Nicholas Longo, Tim edited; "Creating Space for Democracy," "A primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education." The book, copies of which Tim graciously shared with the members, includes examples of successful programs that focus on specific events and locations and others that focus on equipping communities to address needs as they emerge. Guided by traditional Franciscan values and assisted by group members that include two high school English teachers

¹ A list of the participants is included at the end of this report

² If successful, the cottage could become unwieldy in its informal state. Also, by providing services to other institutions, the Cottage could produce an income stream to benefit the Mountain. At that point, shifting it to a subsidiary would protect the Mountain's non-profit status.

*A working title

and a former museum curator, we believe that we can work from existing templates to create original content to teach civil discourse skills.

Facilities: where would the services be provided?

We envision an octagonally shaped facility that would be northeast of Holy Peace Chapel and the labyrinth. Although the architectural style of the Chapel and Peace House creates the desired atmosphere, the floor plans are too divided for effective training programs. Moreover, given the level of utilization of those spaces, scheduling conflicts seem inevitable. Importantly, we are committed to the idea that a Cottage for Civil Discourse would be a dual use structure, augmenting existing facilities to help meet the Mountain's traditional needs.

Grant Scott, who designed Holy Peace Chapel and Peace House conducted a preliminary review and reported that the proposed site appears well suited to the application. The next step in the process should be to engage a landscape architect to prepare a site plot, depicting the proposed structure in the context of existing Mountain structures. Grant recommends that we engage La Quatra Bonci Associates, a firm that prepared plot plans for prior projects at the Mountain.

An exciting bonus in this process... We have been working with Marcia Kelly whose family owns the storied cottage where poet Robert Lax and theologian Thomas Merton spent summers writing while Merton was teaching at St. Bonaventure. Though the cottage is in disrepair, there are several thousand board feet of hardwood plank paneling, ceiling panels and mill work that are in good condition and which we can salvage to use in the Cottage for Civil Discourse.

Relationship to the Board of Trustees. Though the members of the group are talented, creative and enthusiastic about the tasks that lay ahead, we seek a more formal relationship with the Board of Trustees, with emphasis on the following:

- Appointment of a Board member as liaison and agent for two-way communication.
- A process for obtaining Board consent to major steps and expenses.
- A budget allocation for start-up expenses.
- Discussion of a fund-raising campaign to support construction of the Cottage and to help fund program development. We believe there is sufficient merit in the idea of civil discourse programming to support independent fund raising, but wish to avoid conflict with Board initiatives and want to be consistent with fund raising norms established by the Mountain.
- If the Board prefers this project be paused, we would like to discuss funding to allow us to harvest and store the materials at the Lax-Merton cottage.
- An opportunity to address the Board's concerns.

Our Participants.

From the Mountain: Fr. Dan Riley, Br. Kevin Kriso, Br. Joe Kotula, Mike Fenn, Martha Kopcienski

Alums and friends: Tim Shaffer, Grant Scott, Marcia Kelly, Tony Bannon, Lou and Sally Ventura, Gerry Daly, Reggie Harris, Matricia James, Yogini Kothari, David Thomas, Joel Serra