

February 7, 2010

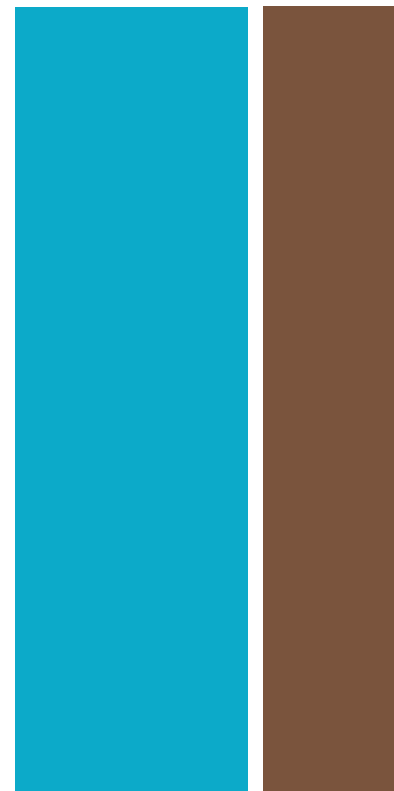
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CHURCH ARCHITECTURE
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Arkansas House of Prayer

FROM IMAGE TO REALITY IN A DECADE

By Christie L. Manussier

The Rev. Canon Susan Sims Smith spent several years as a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist before becoming an Episcopal priest, and the Arkansas House of Prayer began with an image.

In July 1999, Canon Sims Smith received an issue of *THE LIVING CHURCH* that featured the Episcopal House of Prayer, part of a retreat center at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minn. The cover photograph was of the facility's round meditation room, and the article described the House of Prayer's commitment to quiet reflection.

Canon Sims Smith was immediately taken with the rare jewel that it represented: a worship space dedicated to silence. She tucked the cover into her daily planner, and carried it there for the next several years. While revising their wills in the summer of 2002, the canon and her husband, Dr. G. Richard Smith, discussed what they wanted to leave as their legacies. She recognized that building an Arkansas House of Prayer was the contribution closest to her heart. She began asking herself: Why should this dream wait until I am gone?

The canon moved from dreaming to talking. Conversations with friends and colleagues led her to a proposed location: 5.5 wooded acres adjacent to St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Little Rock. With

some seed money, and time donated by public-relations and marketing professionals, Canon Sims Smith created promotional material. The response convinced her that talking might soon become doing.

Canon Sims Smith assumed that she would contact the architectural firm responsible for the original House of Prayer, Cuningham Group Architecture of Minneapolis, Minn., "get the plans from them, and then build a building." Cuningham Group's founder and principal architect, John Cuningham, helped the project in a crucial transition from inspiration to strategy. The canon made initial contact



Arkansas House of Prayer photos

The House of Prayer is open to all who seek a time of uninterrupted solitude and silence.

with the firm in late 2002. She met with Mr. Cunningham during the 74th General Convention, which gathered in Minneapolis in 2003.

Mr. Cunningham made a key recommendation: Convene a brainstorming group. He gently made clear that simply reproducing the House of Prayer — a building designed for a rural monastic campus in Minnesota — would not best meet the needs of a comparatively urban area on the growing side of Little Rock.

Canon Sims Smith gathered the brainstorming group, which produced a concise vision statement: “An interfaith haven set apart in nature, dedicated to contemplative prayer, meditation and quiet, where all are welcome.”

This vision, along with promotional materials, mailings, dinners and concept drawings, all brought more supporters into the fold. Before 2003 ended, the Arkansas House of Prayer had a steering committee. Then the project received its first six-figure donation. Other sizable gifts arrived, including one from the Stella Boyle Smith Trust. One family set up an endowment to provide for the maintenance and utilities of the finished House of Prayer.

As general fundraising continued, Canon Sims Smith and steering committee members gave tours of the site and described what the House of Prayer would offer to Little Rock. They raised more than \$1.3 million.

The project broke ground in December 2006. A year later, on Dec. 6, 2007, Canon Smith and the Rt. Rev. Larry Benfield, the 13th Bishop of Arkansas, led an interfaith dedication service. In its first year of operation, the House of Prayer received sufficient donations to cover its operating expenses while offering silent meditation to

between 1,500 and 2,000 visitors.

The House of Prayer, a ministry of St. Margaret's Church, is open to all who seek a time of uninterrupted solitude and silence. Within the meditation space, the House of Prayer permits no teaching, words, songs or wedding vows — no sounds of any kind, outside those of the natural environment. St. Margaret's makes other spaces available where such sounds are allowed.

A member of the St. Margaret's

staff, or a House of Prayer volunteer, greets visitors, explains the facility's expectations of silence and answers questions. From there, the experience depends on the individual — some people arrive with an agenda, while others are merely curious.

The House is designed to mirror the journey of meditation:

- A path leads through an entrance garden.

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Arkansas House of Prayer

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- Silence begins in a premeditation room, where a visitor may sign the guest book, leave effects on a bench and remove her shoes or don shoe covers.
- That space leads to a library.
- A meditation room contains chairs, cushions and three separate prayer niches. A visitor may pray, write, sit quietly or close his eyes. A ring in the center of the room is open to the ground. A skylight unites the room to the sky above.
- A visitor exits through a fountain garden with rocking chairs and wisteria.

No group is allowed to reserve the meditation space. It is open to anyone who arrives, and more than 40 volunteers help maintain a generous schedule. Key fobs provide unlimited access to more than 200

frequent House of Prayer visitors.

During the next ten years, Canon Sims Smith hopes to develop a new endowment for an annual lecture series. She would like to expand the House of Prayer's gardens to encompass the remainder of the 5.5-acre wooded site, including a stone labyrinth, waterfall and prayer paths throughout.

The canon says her fondest dream is "that other churches will be inspired to provide space for silent prayer and meditation," whether through new construction or by converting a classroom or storage area. No matter the scope of the project, the point is to set aside a "protected place for prayer and meditation in



Canon Sims Smith with a copy of THE LIVING CHURCH that inspired the House of Prayer project.

total, *total* silence, that is beautiful and safe and clean" and dedicated to sacred stillness.

For example, at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Little Rock, where her husband is chairman of the Department of Psychiatry,

what was a walk-in closet is now a meditation room. The Smiths funded the work, also accomplished with the help of Cuningham Architects. She hopes that such projects will "Johnny Appleseed" the idea to other places. What, she wonders, might "the Holy Spirit do with other places that are not being used?"

Christie Manussier is a freelance writer in Racine, Wis.

For more information, visit arkansashouseofprayer.org.

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