

KANUGA REPORT

At the start of 2020, Kanuga was poised for a bright and successful year. The conference center was booked solid and predictions showed that Camp Kanuga and Mountain Trail Outdoor School could have record-breaking seasons. Staff members were on the road promoting Kanuga at national conferences such as Rooted in Jesus, Episcopal Camps and Conference Centers, the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, and diocesan conventions. The advancement office was beginning to develop plans for a capital campaign that would focus on the Chapel of the Transfiguration and include infrastructure improvements.

That winter, the leadership team was continuing its strategic work and design thinking, facilitated by Bishop Brian Prior, and a task force was being formed to re-imagine Kanuga's program offerings for the 21st century. The board of trustees met at Kanuga March 11-13. They would be the last guests at Kanuga until Memorial Day weekend.

Throughout March and April, more than \$7.5 million in conference center reservations were canceled. In April, we began working very hard through communications efforts to keep our constituents engaged, and very quickly reached out for support from those who love Kanuga. We were fortunate to experience an abundance of it, both in prayers and donations. These donations, coupled with funds from the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), initially kept Kanuga open on a limited scale. But what we naively thought might last three months, by May was forecast to last more than a year. Camp Bob, Camp Kanuga, and Mountain Trail Outdoor School suspended operations indefinitely. And along with these measures, in phases Kanuga began to furlough and/or reduce salaries of staff.

Kanuga was able to open for Memorial Day weekend for limited guest retreats with health and safety measures in place, fully compliant with the Centers for Disease Control and state and local guidelines. The subsequent spring retreats resulted in a degree of revenue, but not nearly enough to cover expenses. We began to face the inevitable: we had to downsize yet again in order to preserve the institution. The survival of Kanuga's mission became our sole focus. Our goal was to survive as the gathering place for all people in the furtherance of the mission of the church. All the while, conversations about the new mountain bike park continued, and initial trail development began.

We were determined to keep our mission alive by remaining open in some way to guests for respite, healing, and renewal. Week by week (sometimes day to day), we adjusted everything about our guest experience—from accommodations to meals, housekeeping to facilities maintenance, and trail conservation to waterfront staff—in response to evolving government safety guidelines. Our mantra of “keep it simple” has meant offering lodging only (no accompanying programming) and a re-invention (several times) of our meal service. We normally serve three meals a day in our dining rooms. This summer, we created a grab-and-go-gourmet menu. August-September: a B&B retreats model, continental breakfast only. October: three full meals a day created in partnership with a neighboring summer camp. For Thanksgiving: three full meals a day and a Thanksgiving day feast. For upcoming

winter weekend 2021 retreats, we plan to return to the B&B continental breakfast model, perhaps also serving as a location for micro-weddings and retreats.

One of the most interesting and provocative things we began offering in summer, is the brainchild of The Rev Michael Sullivan (our president and CEO): “Face to Face: Conversations from Kanuga.” In summer, we held four ZOOM conversations hosted by Michael that focused on the critical ways in which the Church can be fully present during this time of racial strife. Guests included (in order of the schedule) Ambassador Reuben Brigety, Sewanee; Dean Randy Hollerith, Washington National Cathedral; Presiding Bishop Curry; and Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas. 300+ souls joined us for these. (links to all four are [here](#), at bottom of page). In November, another set of conversations will be held, these focused on the role creative professionals play in spirituality and justice.

Additional virtual offerings since the pandemic began have included co-hosting Kanuga Christian Formation, Youth Week, Enneagram, Art & Soul, and the upcoming youth Winterlight conference.

There are other ways that Kanuga has been able to get our constituents engaged. Kanuga Trail Conservancy has been in existence for many years on a smaller, very localized scale. During COVID times, we recognized that the ability to explore our 1,400 acres, 30-acre lake, and 20 miles of hiking trails—outside in the fresh air—would offer an experience of adventure and exploration to help people get out of the house, take a break from technology, and reconnect with themselves and nature. One of the key elements of membership is our trail volunteer days. With our massive furloughs, this has been important for the maintenance and care of our extensive property. And we’ve found that it appeals not only to our neighbors in close proximity, but also to our friends around the region.

Ride Kanuga mountain bike park had been in the works for several years, and the timing of its opening in July could not have been better for Kanuga. Ride Kanuga is not owned by Kanuga; we have a business partnership with that group that brings riders to Kanuga (most for the first time) to enjoy our property and overnight accommodations. Ride Kanuga has seen hundreds of guests since opening in mid-July. For Labor Day, we created a “Ride & Stay” promotion; nearly 30% of all lodging guests that weekend were Ride Kanuga mountain bike families. Ride Kanuga has resulted in a significant boost in our lodging reservations and exposed Kanuga to an entirely new demographic.

A miraculous shift is now blessing us. Instead of seeing unknowing as a threat, we are beginning to see it as God’s blessing. This is our opportunity to change, to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in the tradition of our founder Bishop Finlay, daring to adapt, grow, fail, learn, and reinvent. While every team member wishes we could go back, we recognize now that we cannot.

Some people will return. Some will not. Our core values, mission, and vision haven’t changed. We remain focused on being a gathering place for all people to engender a world of good for all God’s people. The pandemic does not change that. Rather, we work diligently to adapt to the reality of God’s creation, ever evolving, ever moving toward glimpses of the kingdom. As the one called to shepherd this team through the storm, I commit myself daily to letting God’s mission, not ours, define who we are and who we will become.

While in the grasp of the Depression in 1930, Bishop Finlay wrote this in his journal: “I lifted mine eyes up unto these hills, from whence cometh my help, not knowing what will come of this place we now call home.” Those words echo today, and with the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, I cling to these ancient words in my prayers: “When you first begin, you find only darkness, as it were, a cloud of unknowing. You don’t know what this means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God. Do what you will, and this darkness and this cloud remain between you and God... Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after Christ whom you love.”

We are continually evaluating our financial outlook. After COVID, after an intense election, and during this time of racial unrest, people need places like Kanuga. Our staff is working nonstop to make sure Kanuga will be here to fulfill its mission—“to welcome *all* people to connect with each other, nature, and the Creator”—for another 100 years.

Kanuga is slowly gearing back up as North Carolina relaxes its response. With all health and safety policies remaining in place, we are seeing an uptick in lodging reservations for the fall and holiday seasons. We are getting calls about “micro-weddings” and other small groups who would like to be with us in the spring. We began taking reservations for Camp Kanuga reservations in October, and cannot wait to welcome our campers back.

We have learned much. Old practices that made us inefficient have become all the more apparent, demanding innovation and adaptation. We must operate within our earned and contributed income to reduce our reliance on a line of credit. Our endowment is not large and operations must become more sustainable. We must pay a living wage. We must care for our property. That’s expensive. But we must make it. We must survive. Our mission is too critical for the church and beyond.

When we emerge from this valley, we have the tremendous responsibility to make this institution stronger and bolder for the mission of the Church. That is our constant focus and our team is doing all it can to ensure that Kanuga is here for generations to come.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael R. Sullivan
President/CEO