

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:19

Since 1961, John Knox Center has sought to be a refuge in the heart of the Presbytery of East Tennessee, set apart to nurture, renew, and inspire people to love God and each other, and to serve Christ. Recently, John Knox Center has been in a time of transition, which began with the departure of former Executive Director Bri Payne, and continues now with the departure of former Transitional Executive Director, Penny Babelay. During this time, the Outdoor Ministry Team (OMT) has had many conversations about what our next steps should be.

Over the last year, OMT has grown in our understanding of JKC’s finances and needs, made improvements to facilities, and put our staff in the position to meet our current needs while also beginning the process of envisioning the future. In the last month, in coordination with the Presbytery Leadership Council, we made the decision to make a significant investment in that visioning process, and have entered into a contract with Run River, a consulting firm that specializes in faith-based camps.

During our conversations where we were considering working with Run River, the OMT came to a hard realization. In order to do this work in a way that most benefits the present and future of John Knox Center, we would need to prioritize the visioning process above all other efforts. It is because of this, OMT has come to the very difficult decision to forgo Summer Camp programming in 2026. Though we know this will come as a huge disappointment to the families already signed up to attend, we believe this is necessary in order to strengthen John Knox for many more summers of camp in 2027 and beyond. OMT and Ryan Hughes, JKC Camp Manager, are working with those families to provide them with information about alternative options for faith-based summer camps in neighboring presbyteries’ camps this summer. John Knox Center has issued full refunds to those families, and will provide additional financial incentives for their participation in Summer camp in 2027.

So if not Summer Camp, what will JKC and OMT be doing? In the coming months, we plan on prioritizing the following:

- A group composed of OMT members and PET at large members will begin our work with Run River, meeting frequently to assess where we are, what we need, where we want to go, and how we are going to get there.
- OMT, Ryan, and the rest of the camp staff will also be working on some special programming to get folks out to our beautiful campus with details and dates coming out in the not too distant future.

- We will be touching base with churches, families, alumni, supporting partners, and givers who support us financially to grow those relationships and receive input about their hopes for the future of JKC.

As John Knox Center enters into this new chapter, we are encouraged by the support this special place receives from everyone who has ever felt the presence of God here. We are grateful for the support of so many churches and families that have found renewal and inspiration in our lake waters and well-worn rocking chairs. We are grateful for the support of this presbytery, which continues to be an incredible partner in this shared ministry. OMT and the John Knox Center staff know we have been entrusted with the profound privilege of ensuring John Knox Center continues to be that refuge of creation set apart to ensure all can feel the presence of God and the love of Christ, now and in the generations to come. We covet your prayers as we continue in this work, and we are excited about all that will come from it. Indeed, a new thing is springing forth.

The Outdoor Ministry Team
Presbytery of East Tennessee