

Silence in Three Rivers: Spiritual Centers Teach Seekers 'The Divine Language'

*By Charles Honey
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THREE RIVERS – The silence is deep, punctuated only by the chirping of a bird outside and the creaking of chairs in this sun-drenched chapel.

"Let's begin singing," David Wenger says, and begins humming a familiar tune in a splendid voice.

"For the beauty of the Earth, for the glory of the skies," sing a dozen people arrayed in a circle. "Lord of all, to thee we raise this our hymn of grateful praise."

Thus begins another day at The Hermitage, a spiritual retreat center 80 miles south of Grand Rapids. Here, among the rolling cornfields north of Three Rivers, pilgrims find a quiet place to connect with God and rediscover themselves.

One of them this day is the Rev. Carol Faas, pastor of Clancy Street Ministries in Grand Rapids. Most days she works with struggling people, raises scarce money and watches cable news. This morning she picks wild blackberries.

The Hermitage reminds her of the Apostle Paul's call to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

"That's what happens to me here," says Faas, who's here to help make jam with her husband and two children. "It seems like my mind gets emptied and I can re-start."

Something in the peaceful landscape helps her do that, she adds. "It's like Jerusalem. It's up high, and there's a sense that God is there."

Something about Three Rivers...

Others long have sensed God's presence in this cluster of spiritual retreats south of Kalamazoo.

Adjacent to The Hermitage is GilChrist, an interfaith center run by the Kalamazoo-based Fetzer Institute. About 1.5 miles east is Saint Gregory's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery that welcomes visitors.

Smaller pilgrimage places also are nearby: Apple Farm, a community emphasizing the power of symbols and Jungian analysis; The Fen, a "peace and poetry camp" for women; and the Earthsong Peace/Sound Chamber, a place of prayer and divinely attuned vibrations.

These places have built upon one another since Saint Gregory's was founded in 1946. But some say the area has a rarefied quality conducive to contemplation.

Nancy Bell, who has lived near the abbey for 34 years, says there are remains of an American Indian medicine wheel on her property. She believes it was a sacred place to early residents.

"A lot of people (say) they can feel something different when they come into the area," says Bell, 70.

Some say that difference is a spiritual "thin space," expressed in a weekly liturgy at the Mennonite-owned Hermitage: "Heaven is here, and Earth, and the space is thin between them."

"There are some places where the spiritual and the physical are very close together," explains Naomi Wenger, who runs The Hermitage with her husband, David. "Some people who come here will say they feel this is a thin place, and they can sense more of a spiritual atmosphere."

The atmosphere envelops this region of northwest St. Joseph County off U.S. 131. In a gentle landscape of wide fields, antique stores and arching maples lies a confluence of spiritual practices, from suburban seekers doing yoga to monks chanting ancient Psalms.

"Slow down, please" reads a sign on the path to The Hermitage -- good advice for anyone entering its 62 acres.

Volunteers Willard and Alice Roth are fixing supper in St. Joseph's Barn, a remnant of the O'Malley farm on which both The Hermitage and GilChrist developed. The barn was converted to a guest house since its founding in the mid-1980s by Gene and Mary Herr, a Mennonite couple from Elkhart, Ind.

Airy spaces and prayer rooms intermingle with its massive beams and handmade crosses. Guest rooms, which cost a suggested \$60 per night, feature prayer kneelers, writing tables and candles. Hardier pilgrims stay at three rustic cabins in the woods.

Alice Roth offers a visitor mint iced tea while Willard fixes a vegetable-egg skillet dish. A retired Mennonite pastor and editor from Elkhart, he helped found The Hermitage as "a place of prayer in the country."

"This place is a place to celebrate our being -- our being human, our being loving, our being a light," says Willard, 75.

Group meals are eaten in silence and guests are urged to respect the quiet. It's a quality some 600 visitors a year hunger for, say David and Naomi Wenger, proprietors since 2001.

Learning to be quiet

"We give each other permission to be silent," says David, who once owned a fast-paced PR agency with Naomi. "Silence is a gift that we're not given in our society."

Silence is "the divine language of God," which people can share with devotions and schedule-free days, Naomi adds.

"You don't have to accomplish anything on retreat," she says. "The point is to let God accomplish what God wants to accomplish."

"We want guests to experience that God is much nearer than we imagine," adds David.

John Howie senses that at GilChrist, 67 acres of woods and fields just west of The Hermitage. Guests who stay in its eight cottages and stroll its interfaith gardens feel an unusual spiritual vibe, says Howie, the retreat's director.

"It's almost like the tone of the land, or how things resonate here, is particularly inviting," says Howie, a psychologist.

Deepening the faith

GilChrist was founded in 1995 by Rob Lehman and Molly Bass of Kalamazoo. They later donated it to the Fetzer Institute, where Lehman is board president.

For a suggested \$40 a night, guests can walk a mile-long labyrinth carved out of wildflowers or pray in a little stone chapel many call "the hobbit house." The staff hosts daily meditation, yoga classes and group retreats at Windhill, the common house.

"If people are left free to deepen into their own faith, it will take them where they need to go," says Howie, a cradle Catholic partial to Buddhism. "No matter what faith they are, they will be more loving and caring."

GilChrist shares a friendly relationship with The Hermitage, whose guests are free to wander its grounds. At both places, visitors often spend their first day sleeping.

"Most people are just exhausted," Howie says. "The pace the world brings at them is so intense they just need to rest."

Guests are free to roam here, and to wander its gardens featuring statues of Buddha, Hindu deities and other faith symbols. About 800 visitors a year explore their faith and personal rhythm.

"They have an experience of the divine, and it's in them," Howie says. "It's like this memory they have when they go back out in the world."

A life set apart

The world seems far away at Saint Gregory's Abbey, home to seven Benedictine monks who share their ritual rhythms with pastors, seminarians and other guests.

The monks live according to the rule of St. Benedict, a sixth-century monk considered the father of Western monasticism. They gather daily at 4 a.m. for the first of seven prayer services, punctuated by periods of rest and work. Between evening prayers and morning Mass the monks observe "the greater silence" -- no talking at all.

The Episcopal monks take life vows requiring obedience, chastity and no personal possessions. Brother Abraham Newsom, formerly of San Angelo, Texas, says he chose the life because it "makes me who I should be."

It's like asking, "Why did you marry that person?" says Newsom, 44, who has lived here 16 years. "You just know it's right for you."

Set on a former farm of about 700 acres, the monastery includes a well-stocked library, sparsely furnished guest rooms and a cottage in the woods for larger groups. Guests pay as much or as little as they like.

Abbott Andrew Marr, a graduate of Kalamazoo College, says Saint Gregory's offers guests an "environment of prayer."

"There are a lot of places where there are trees and it's quiet," Marr notes. "But there aren't that many places where there's an ongoing worshipping community that's in church all day, and therefore a community you can move into for the time that you're here."

Elizabeth Vann has come here several times since 1990, often to work on her doctoral dissertation. She recently stopped by on her way back to Brockton, Mass.

"It allows you to think about the direction of your life in a different way," reflects Vann, 44, sitting under a massive oak tree. "I can't hear any cars. It's slow. Footsteps are loud suddenly."

Later, the monks gather in the chapel as the sun lowers in a clear sky. They sing hymns in plain chant, their reverent voices reverberating in the high rafters.

Brother Abraham prays, "The Lord Almighty grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end."

Then the greater silence begins, over Saint Gregory's and the fields beyond.