

Crisis at Canterbury

Diocesan Leadership Steps in to Chart a Path Forward



BY CFE STAFF

On June 15, 2023, five days after his ordination and consecration as fifth bishop of the Diocese of Central Florida, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Justin S. Holcomb chaired his first Diocesan Board meeting. A financial crisis at Canterbury Conference Center was on the agenda. Canterbury was operating with a monthly deficit of \$30,000-\$40,000 and had a \$1 million mortgage due on June 30 with no ability to pay it off.

Canterbury is a separate organization with its own board of directors on which the bishop sits as an ex officio member, but diocesan financial support has been critical to the conference center's survival. On June 27, 2023, Holcomb attended his first monthly Canterbury Board meeting, at which board members agreed it would be impossible to recover from their fiscal crisis under the current conference and retreat center business model.

The Canterbury Board then voted unanimously that all members resign immediately, leaving the bishop as sole board member to exercise his authority under Canterbury's Articles of Incorporation to nominate new board members to be elected by the Diocesan Board. Executive Director of Canterbury Chalmers Morse also submitted his resignation effective June 30, 2023, which the bishop accepted.

These actions by the Canterbury Board and Morse were taken with the confidence that diocesan leadership would be able to chart a path forward for Canterbury. The Diocesan Board moved swiftly to reduce the monthly budget deficit and work with a major creditor to restructure debt. The Rev. Canon Scott Holcombe temporarily assumed the role of managing director of Canterbury with the directive

to suspend operations if the conference center couldn't be self-sustaining. Canterbury continues to fulfill commitments to diocesan ministries and bookings with deposits in addition to some new business. "Our aim is not to just sell and offload Canterbury," Holcomb said. "We're committed to finding a way to use the property for the good and mission of the diocese." Toward that end, Holcomb consulted with the Very Rev. Canon Dr. Lang Lowrey III, canon for Christian enterprise for the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta. The Executive Committee of the Diocesan Board received guidance from Mr. Walter Carpenter Jr. MAI, CRE and the diocese also engaged Stewardship Reality to identify sustainable business models for Canterbury that will enhance the mission and ministry of the church.

At the July 20, 2023, meeting of the Diocesan Board, Holcomb nominated two previous Canterbury Board members to serve with him on the new Canterbury Board: The Rev. Tom Phillips and Mr. Arthur Evans. "Eventually, I will nominate people who were not on the Canterbury Board," Holcomb explained. The Diocesan Board unanimously elected both Phillips and Evans to the standard three-year term.

Holcomb recognizes the difficulty of addressing the crisis at Canterbury, but he's determined to do so with transparency. "The fact that this is being talked about with honesty and clarity is really healthy," Holcomb said. "I wish we didn't have to do this, but since we have to, I love that we're doing it this way."