

## THE STORY OF CAMP BEMENT

Diocese of Western Massachusetts<sup>1</sup>

March 12, 2010

The closure and impending sale of Camp Bement has stirred many responses and this is understandable given the long and often nostalgic history many have had over the years with the camp. During this transition time the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, clergy and a number of parishioners are working to meet their leadership responsibilities, especially to provide regular and factual information. We hope that we can provide fellow members of our church and fellow citizens of our state with a clear and rational statement of our history, experience, and goals with respect to Camp Bement. The leaders of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts are determined to find and follow a path that leads to an overtly possible outcome. This might be reasonably defined (quoting Gifford Pinchot) as “...the greatest good, for the greatest number, over the long run.”

### Historical context

Mary V. Bement (1876-1944) lived in Greenwich, CT and New York, NY and spent the last 15 years of her life as summer resident in Stockbridge, MA. She stayed at the Red Lion Inn, enjoyed the Stockbridge Library, and worshipped at St. Paul’s Church. (She worshipped at St. Bartholomew’s Church in New York.) Her earthly remains were interred at the Stockbridge Cemetery—along with those of her parents, brother, and sister. Miss Bement purchased a family plot and had her parents’ remains exhumed from Terre Haute, Indiana and moved to Stockbridge.<sup>2</sup>

Upon her death, she left a portion of her estate (\$1,500,000 received in 1946) to the Diocese of Western Massachusetts. Here is a complete transcript of the entire salient section of her Last Will and Testament (Third Codicil, July 19, 1944).

*All the rest, residue and remainder of my estate, wheresoever situated and from whatsoever source derived, including any legacy which may lapse, I give, devise and bequeath to The Trustees for the Diocese of Western Massachusetts, a body corporate, this fund to known as “The Charles Russell Bement and Mary Charlotte Ruby Bement Foundation;” the net income therefrom only in each year to be used for purposes of the religious, charitable and educational work of the said Diocese without profit to any individual or corporation beyond such reasonable salaries as individuals may earn in the course of conduct of the affairs of the foundation, which may or may not be incorporated as the governing body of the Trustees for the Diocese of Western Massachusetts may determine.*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.diocesewma.org](http://www.diocesewma.org)

<sup>2</sup> Miss Bement’s great-great grandfather, Asa Bement, moved from Wethersfield, CT to Stockbridge in 1770. He became a member of the Board of Selectmen in 1779 and died in 1814.

This generous bequest to the Trustees of the Diocese (not the Bishop) was never specifically directed for the establishment of a summer camp.

Camp Bement was opened in 1948 with the purchase of 110 acres in Charlton, MA. The number of campers and the use of the facilities grew, through a succession of ten directors, reaching its peak under the capable and inspired leadership of Mark Rourke (1989-2004). Additional purchases of land brought the total area to 355 acres including the 28 acre Jones Pond. After Mark Rourke's untimely death, the Bement Board of Directors and a series of interim directors worked assiduously to continue the Bement programs. They were fully supported in these efforts by Bishop Gordon Scruton and the Diocesan Council.

#### Efforts to Save Bement, 2003-2008

The chronology that follows summarizes the key actions and investments that were undertaken by hundreds of people over a period of six years—culminating in the well-publicized “Bement Summit”, attended by more than 100 people in 2008.

2002 – Bishop Scruton commissioned the Bement Board of Directors. The Very Reverend James G. Munroe (Dean of Christ Church Cathedral) and Ms. Becky DeSmith served as co-chairs. This dedicated 12-member board was comprised of clergy and lay people from around the Diocese with demonstrated expertise in financial oversight, camp management, and fund raising. The Board met bi-weekly for two years.

2004 – After Mark Rourke's death, the Board of Directors met weekly to fill the responsibilities of this vacant position, manage staffing and property issues, and meet the pastoral, fiduciary, and operational responsibilities of Camp Bement.

2005 – A full-time interim Camp and Conference Center director is hired, followed by a summer camp director and full-time site manager.

2006 – A consulting firm<sup>3</sup> with expertise in resident camps, conference centers, and retreat centers (Kaleidoscope, Inc.) was retained to provide the Diocese with a comprehensive assessment, strategic program/ministry plan, and master site plan for Bement. They reported an additional investment of \$4,100,000 would be needed to develop, equip, and staff a viable camp and conference center in light of current expectations of campers and conference attendees, regulatory requirements for camp and conference centers, and the competitive environment with respect to other facilities in the region.

2007 – Diocesan Council votes to approve \$550,000 from Diocesan endowment for Bement capital improvements over five years.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.kaleidoscope-inc.com/>

Ultimately, thousands of volunteer hours and a total investment of \$1,733,000<sup>4</sup> could not reverse the decline in enrollment at Bement Camp or use of the Conference Center. Enrollment peaked in 1994 with 915 campers. Enrollments in 2006, 2007 and 2008 were 338, 315, and 250 campers, respectively. In 2008, only 23 out of our 67 parishes sent children to Camp Bement; they comprised less than half of the total enrollment. Only 10 parishes sent three or more campers in 2008. These declines are consistent with the decline in church school attendance in our Diocese over the last ten years. Total church school attendance across the diocese has decreased from 2,840 to 1,875, a 34 % decline. At the same time, the conference center function of Camp Bement was no longer viable. Only six of our 67 parishes held gatherings at Camp Bement in 2008. The Kaleidoscope assessment, new DEP water supply regulations, and discussions with the building inspector made it clear that significant infrastructure repairs would be required before the 2009 season. Additional improvements and enhancements would be needed to make the camp and conference center competitive with other comparable programs in the region. In light of this daunting set of fiscal, demographic, and regulatory realities, the Diocesan Council voted to close Camp Bement in June 2009 and retain LandVest, Inc. to appraise the property and enumerate options.

In August 2009, Bishop Scruton commissioned the Bement Property Discernment Group<sup>5</sup> to review the forthcoming LandVest report, discuss and debate a comprehensive set of options, and present findings and recommendations to the Diocesan Council. The Diocesan Council accepted the recommendations (with minor revisions) of the Bement Property Discernment Group at its December 11, 2009 meeting and voted unanimously to:

1. systematically explore options for the sale of the Bement property (with first preference given to viable offers from religious, camp, and/or conservation groups),
2. retain LandVest, Inc. as broker and agent,
3. establish the **Bement Future Fund** to receive all net proceeds from the sale, and
4. commission the *Next Generation Discernment Team for Christian Formation* to make recommendations for using the Bement Future Fund to enhance programs for children, young people and adults across the Diocese of Western Massachusetts.

Bishop Scruton and the Diocesan Council subsequently appointed the Reverend William MacDonald Murray, Rector of Trinity Church in Milford, Massachusetts (immediate past chair of the Bement Board of Directors) as chair for the Next Generation Discernment Team for Christian Formation. He was joined by the three Diocesan Christian Formation Missioners to form the nucleus of the team.

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<sup>4</sup> Operating deficits of \$641,000 [closed with Diocesan funds] + \$596,000 in capital maintenance + \$422,000 in Diocesan grants + \$74,000 for expert consultants [Kaleidoscope, Inc., LandVest, Inc., consulting engineers])

<sup>5</sup> Paul K. Barten (Chair), The Rev. Canon Stephen Paul Booth, The Rev. Nancy Strong, Steven Abdow, Laura Beckman-Devik, Eric Ford, Wayne Gass, and Diana MacFarlane

Bishop Scruton is working with Fr. Murray and the Missioners to refine the scope of work and charter for the team and expand its membership to effectively represent the Diocese.

Bishop Scruton, the Bement Property Discernment Group, and a majority of the Diocesan Council firmly believe that using the remaining equity in Camp Bement to reinvigorate Christian Formation in all parishes across the diocese is:

1. consistent with Mary Bement's wishes and intent;
2. sound and necessary financial stewardship, and
3. a carefully and prayerfully considered response to the changing interests and urgent needs of children, young people, and adults in our parishes and communities the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Diocese of Western Massachusetts is certainly not the first, nor will it be the last, to decide that closing a beloved camp is necessary if the church is to evolve, adapt, and grow. At the same time, the leadership of the diocese is also fully cognizant of their responsibilities as citizens and stewards of the environment and will review all prospective sales in this context. Simply put, there will be no casinos, big box stores, or other forms of development that are at odds with our heritage, values, and beliefs.

LandVest organized a meeting at Camp Bement on February 3, 2010 to which a wide range of religious, camp, conservation groups, land trusts, and state agencies were invited. The property is being offered for sale to this preferred group of buyers before the property is listed on the open market in May 2010 – at which time all qualified buyers (including the preferred group) will be considered.