

Star of the North Retreat Centre aims to 'shine on' through upgrades to 65-year-old facility

The Star of the North is launching a three-year fundraising campaign in an effort to raise \$500,000 for upgrades to the St. Albert retreat centre that has focused on spiritual growth and renewal for 65 years.

"For me it's a place where people can unplug and get away, and it is a consecrated place," said Lucie Leduc, executive director of the Star of the North Retreat Centre. Offerings at the Star include spiritual retreats, workshops, and seminars in social justice, self-awareness, personal growth and theology.

The non-profit retreat centre has welcomed an average of 5,000 people each year for roughly 300 events since the Oblates of Mary Immaculate congregation opened it in 1953.

"I think that people need a place to centre, to heal, to renew in a creative theology that helps to situate us in our own times," Leduc said, "not to be stagnant in any one place but to keep moving and journeying spiritually. I firmly believe we need those spaces. I don't think they're finished yet. I think they need to be re-sought out in terms of what we're doing within them."

To that end, the Starlight Shine-On campaign aims to raise half a million dollars to replenish the retreat centre's capital reserve fund and for key building improvements including replacing the roof shingles and exterior siding, adding more windows, and remodelling its signature chapel.

"The chapel is our finale. We hope to completely make that the beautiful space it needs to be, and it needs a whole overhaul literally from the ground up," Leduc said. "We can't get grant funding for that kind of thing, so this is a timely way to get help from the people."

"We're not changing the footprint of the building. We're just remodelling."

The Star of the North is located on Mission Hill, on property shared by the Edmonton Archdiocese and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate of Lacombe Canada. The 52-bedroom facility accommodates live-in groups and has facilities for dining, meetings and conferences.

Although it began as a Catholic retreat centre, it has evolved into a more

ecumenical scope.

Leduc noted the success of its *Breaking New Ground Together* series on the indigenous rights, which featured Marie Wilson, a former commissioner of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.



The distinctively-shaped chapel attached to the Star of the North Retreat Centre is in need of renovations.

The Star has also added workshops on dementia care for both caregivers and families.

And after 65 years, the Star's mission is more relevant than ever before, said Frank Steffler, chairman of the Starlight Shine-On campaign, which was officially launched at an evening celebration on Nov. 30.

"Never before have we had so much anxiety in our consciences," Steffler said. "We have to get out of our heads and into our hearts, and that's why the Star is more important than ever before."

"For me it's always been ecumenical and interfaith. I really feel that's cutting edge, because it's intercultural," Leduc said. "We need places that are safe spaces that are also open to that kind of dialogue and encounter to further that."

The Star creates what Pope Francis refers to as a "culture of encounter."

"Part of evangelization and part of being in the Christian community is to offer sacred space and space where people can reflect, but not only Catholics. We're trying to allow people, no matter where they are, to come as they are to meet God where they are and to grow in that."

Father Ron Rolheiser, an internationally respected teacher, writer, and retreat leader, has a long history with the Star of the North. He offered some inspiring advice on the theme of "Having a Reconciling Heart in a Bitter Time" in his address at the campaign launch. An attitude of gratitude is essential if

we are to avoid slipping into bitterness, especially as we age, he said.

“For the love of Jesus, give thanks!”

“The question becomes, ‘Who do you want to be in a room with? Where are the cold places in your heart? How do we move to mellow hearts?’ ” said Rolheiser, whose weekly column appears in nearly 100 newspapers and websites around the world, including Grandin Media.

The second key, Rolheiser suggested, is forgiveness. “Forgive them all so you don’t die an angry, bitter person, because that’s the only moral imperative there is. If we can’t forgive each other, then Heaven would be just like Earth.”

The Starlight Shine-On campaign marks a departure from the annual StarFest fundraising dinners held since 1990. Leduc said the proceeds from the dinners had been diminishing, and she hopes to revive donations and “look at a different way of doing things.”

“There are bigger projects on the horizon,” Leduc explained, “and if we want to have a facility that is beautiful as well as peaceful, as well as having all qualities needed to do the programming, to be in a position to offer the programming in a beautiful space, then we need the extra hand up for this.”

How do you raise \$500,000? “You ask!,” Leduc laughs. “You get a committee out and start asking.”

To donate, contact the Star of the North Retreat Centre.