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Epworth By the Sea Announces Leadership Transition

President and CEO Joel Willis to Retire After 45 Years of Distinguished Service; Carlos Cantu Appointed as Successor

St. Simons Island, Georgia — (May 2025) — The Board of Trustees of Epworth by the Sea is pleased to announce an executive leadership transition as Mr. Joel Willis, President and CEO, prepares to retire after 45 years of dedicated and distinguished service to the retreat center. The Board has appointed Mr. Carlos Cantu to succeed Mr. Willis and will assume the role following a brief transition period, leading Epworth into its next chapter.

Mr. Willis has provided steady and visionary leadership throughout his distinguished tenure, guiding Epworth by the Sea through decades of growth, programmatic development, and facility enhancement. His commitment to the mission of Christian hospitality has been instrumental in establishing Epworth as a premier destination for religious retreats, conferences, and gatherings across the Southeastern United States and beyond.

“Joel Willis’s leadership has been marked by unwavering dedication, integrity, and a deep passion for serving others through the ministry of Epworth by the Sea,” said Mark Massee, Chairman of the Board of Trustees. “His legacy of faithful stewardship and vision will continue to shape the institution for years to come. On behalf of the Board, staff, and the countless guests who have been impacted by his service, we extend our profound gratitude.”

“Epworth by the Sea is, at its core, a Christian place for worship, study, and fellowship. During my tenure as CEO, I’ve had the privilege of watching it grow—welcoming more guests while remaining deeply rooted in our mission,” reflected outgoing President and CEO Joel Willis. “Remarkably, 75% of our visitors are return groups, a testament to the lasting impact this sacred space has on those who come

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here. I've also been blessed to lead an incredible team, including more than 25 caring staff members who have served faithfully for over 20 years. They've made me look good while I've had the honor of leading them. Through it all, we have never lost sight of the vision our founders had when they created this retreat."

The Board is equally pleased to welcome Mr. Carlos Cantu as the incoming President and Chief Executive Officer. Mr. Cantu brings to Epworth a breadth of experience in faith-based nonprofit leadership and retreat center administration, coupled with a strong commitment to advancing the mission and core values of the organization. Mr. Cantu most recently served as the Chief Executive Officer of The Biblical History Center in LaGrange, Georgia for the past five years. His experience includes stints with The Salvation Army as a Branch Director and a Division Vice President.

"It is a great honor to be entrusted with the leadership of Epworth by the Sea," said Carlos Cantu. "I am committed to preserving the rich heritage established under Mr. Willis's tenure while embracing opportunities to expand our reach and impact on service to the Universal Christian Church and the broader community."

For 75 years, Epworth by the Sea has remained true to its original vision: to provide a setting for Christian experience, teaching, and growth. Today, that mission continues with ongoing property enhancements, including a new wing at Turner Lodge and upgrades to guest rooms and youth cabins. Epworth remains a place where guests of all ages, especially children and youth, come away for spiritual renewal on the peaceful banks of the Frederica River.

About Epworth by The Sea

Opened in 1950, Epworth by the Sea is a Christian conference and retreat center on historic St. Simons Island, Georgia. Dedicated to providing a sacred place for worship, learning, and spiritual renewal, Epworth offers a serene setting for religious, educational, and community gatherings, serving guests from across the nation and around the world. For more information, visit www.epworthbythesea.org.

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