

NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER: AN URBAN LOVE STORY

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I

Driving through Harrisburg, the capital city of Pennsylvania, today, one would hardly guess that in 1907 the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church declared the region a "foreign mission field."¹ They urged the greater church body to recognize and acknowledge the influx of immigrants from eastern Europe and to help with the needed work. Out of this need grew the "Methodist Mission," according to the original Minute Book of the Meeting of the Board of Management of the Methodist Deaconess Work, Harrisburg, PA, which was recovered in 1989 from the bottom of an old storage trunk at the Center. The original mission project was located in a building at 402 South Second Street in the city, which is no longer in existence, and rent was agreed on at \$16.00 per month. Miss Helen E. Kirk of Albany, New York was hired as the first Deaconess in Harrisburg and officially began her duties on September 26, 1910. Records indicate that she received her first paycheck on October 11, in the amount of forty dollars.²

After considerable discussion the first year, a decision was made to adopt a policy of charging a "nominal fee of five cents per week for each child attending the kindergarten." The philosophy that there is value in charging something, no matter how small the fee, has been adhered to until the present time as a way of encouraging more participant "ownership" in the Center's work.

Incredibly, interesting tidbits of history emerge from the pages of the old Minute Book. For example, the local plea for kindergarten furniture netted no response. The furniture was finally purchased from the far away Altoona School Board. Six tables, fifty chairs and a few other items valued at \$140.00 actually cost the mission only \$25.00. This seems to have established a long-standing Neighborhood Center tradition of bargain hunting for needed items and "stretching" mission dollars. It is also

¹*Annual Report of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.* (Western Methodist Book Concern Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1907), 227.

²Minute Book of the Meeting of the Board of Management of the Methodist Deaconess Work, Harrisburg, PA. (Pages are not numbered and many are tattered with some missing).

interesting to note that five or six larger chairs were needed in kindergarten for older students. Immigrant parents knew that their children had to begin their education and cultural assimilation regardless of age or size.

Today one can only speculate as to the high level of frustration that must have existed due to the difficult living and working conditions. In spite of everything, the Mission's work did prosper and grow. In addition to the regular kindergarten, there were various interest groups for both boys and girls after school and in the evening hours. It seems that one of the most popular was "kitchengarden," a program designed to instruct children in setting tables, sweeping, dusting, etc. English classes were held twice a week, and by April 1912 various Slavic people began showing up in these classes.

During the summer of 1914, noon-time worship services were held in a nearby cigar factory. A report on the religious conversion of an Italian emerges from the Minute Book, as does a report on the outbreak of measles and other diseases and how this affected program attendance.

A sign of those times is found in a report that "white" children attended class in the morning and "colored" children in the afternoon. It was also reported that the two sewing classes were divided between one of "mostly Jewish girls and the other class of other nationalities."

The effects of World War I show in the Board Minutes of March 15, 1918:

All classes taught patriotism by talks on war savings and how children can help win the war. The children also are engaged in making a comfort robe for the Red Cross and saving their pennies for the War Relief Fund.³

Obviously, the Italian population of Harrisburg was of significant numbers during these early years, for the November 1919 report to the Woman's Home Missions is titled, "Italians Work of the Harrisburg Deaconess Home." An addition to this report is a listing of all the famous Italians from Dante to Marconi.

We know today that the 1920's were ushered in by what has been called "The Red Scare." The identification of the alien with un-American philosophies gave rise to immigration restrictions. Just after New Year's Day in 1920, anti-communist raids took place in scores of large cities (not Harrisburg), and police carted hundreds of people off to jail. This was only one example of a very narrow nationalism of the time. In the south, the Ku Klux Klan was spewing forth its "anti-Negro" message and burning crosses. In the north the Klan directed its hostilities against Catholics and Jews. America was experiencing its worst racial intolerance since the 1870s.

Virtually none of this unrest and intolerance is reflected in any of the official Harrisburg mission records. Locally, the deaconesses went

³*Thirty-fifth Annual Report of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1915-1916*, 171.

about helping the poor and the immigrants as they had for a decade. Several oral history interviews serve to validate that fact. Excerpts from two of these interviews follow.

Fanny Grant Krevsky was born into an Orthodox Jewish family. She grew up hearing stories of her parents' experiences in Russia and their passage across the Atlantic in steerage (the poorest section of any ship). Her mother worked in the sweat shops of New York City. When she was one year old, the family moved to Harrisburg, where her parents operated a grocery store. Fanny describes her neighborhood in those days as,

A mixture, a collage of Blacks, Jewish, Italians, Rumanians, and Croatians. We were very tight. Everybody cared for everyone and it was like an extended family.⁴

What is unique about this Orthodox Jewish family is that Fanny and her sisters (apparently not her brothers) were sent to the Methodist Mission. What did their Jewish neighbors think about their regular attendance at a Protestant Mission? Mrs. Krevsky replied as follows:

. . . My mother decided that for the summer we would also go to the Daily Vacation Bible School. That was unheard of, everybody was giving her all kinds of dire forecasts that we would become Methodist. Indeed I did learn some of the most beautiful hymns of my life. . . . They taught me to "suffer the little children to come unto me!" All things they taught me but they did not tell me, "Hey, we want you to remember this and forget that you are Jewish." Evidently what they did was right! I remember all the good things they taught us; they did not teach me anything bad.⁵

Mrs. Krevsky speaks for numerous children who have passed through the Neighborhood Center when she says, "The Center was like our surrogate parent!"⁶

Bessie Braxton is a dignified African-American lady who was born on January 19, 1915 in Harrisburg. Following high school graduation in 1936, Mrs. Braxton attended Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina on a Methodist Scholarship acquired through the Harrisburg Mission. Later she was hired as a teacher helping in the kindergarten. Five of Bessie's sisters and two of her brothers came through the program. Mrs. Braxton has had a life-long relationship with the Mission, as have a number of her family. When asked to recall those early mission days Mrs. Braxton had this to say:

When I went to the Methodist Mission it had moved to Seventh Street in the double house. They had kindergarten on one side and offices and the dining room on the other. Upstairs they had programs and clubrooms. When I was little I learned sewing. When I was in high school, I got help with my homework (one of the reasons she was able to go on to college). I went to kindergarten. My whole family did. Everybody had

⁴Interview with Fanny G. Krevsky, September 3, 1987, Harrisburg, PA.

⁵Krevsky interview.

⁶Krevsky interview.

a "club" after school starting at six years old. We all went to the Methodist Mission. We owned the place! (Mrs. Braxton laughs recalling those days.)

During the interview she recalled with fondness her experiences with clubs, religion, and summer camps. She best summed up her experiences at the Center by saying simply, "You could always get help there."⁷

II

The harsh cold statistics of the Great Depression show that unemployment moved from three million in the early 1930s to twelve million by 1932. Translated into human terms, this meant that families lost their homes and lived in empty lots or in crude improvised housing. Men stood in line at soup kitchens for a meager handout, or they sold apples on the street corners. Many searched for food outside the back doors of hotels and restaurants. The heartaches and worries of so many can hardly be measured, and Harrisburg was no exception.

During this time the Methodist Mission experienced the kind of financial insecurity that has been a recurring dilemma throughout its long and productive history. An illustration of the financial crunch is found in a note dated December 1933. Reverend Shultz indicated that the Mission was having a problem paying for 83 quarts of milk used during January at a cost of 24 cents per gallon. A promise of \$10.00 from the Ridge Avenue Church (Rev. Shultz's church), and \$10.00 from Grace Church seems to have solved the problem. At the same time it was recommended that each child be urged to bring 2 cents to kindergarten.

Further evidence of the difficult financial situation faced by the Mission is contained in the September 1933 minutes when the Board, "recommended the elimination of the sewing teacher and the cutting of the weekly Board allowance (for food for the deaconesses) from \$10.00 to \$7.00 to conform with the new budget."⁸

In an attempt to understand the flavor of the time period and the conditions under which the Mission operated, no better source can be found than the writings of local author-editor Paul Beers who commented that,

Harrisburg, which thinks of itself as a law-and-order town, was wet during the 13 years of Prohibition, from January 17, 1920 to December 4, 1933. The churches had rejoiced at Prohibition and the Dauphin County Women's Christian Temperance Union held a celebration at Stevens Memorial Church, where the song, "Good Bye Saloon" was sung. But Prohibition never had a chance in Harrisburg. An estimated 50 speakeasies were between North and Reily Street. A candy store sold booze as did a bakery. In one winter, 13 Harrisburgers died because kerosene got into the booze.⁹

⁷Interview with Mrs. Bessie Braxton, August 26, 1987, Harrisburg, PA.

⁸Minutes of the Board of Managers, September, 1933.

⁹Paul Beers, *Profiles From the Susquehanna Valley* (Harrisburg, PA. Stockpole Books, 1973), 26-27.

It was in this type of environment that deaconesses such as Miss Ula Garrison (October 1933 through September 1952) and others toiled daily. In spite of hardships and financial struggles the work went forward. Miss Garrison summarized the mission work well in her Annual Report of 1937-38 by saying:

During the past year the Center has brought happiness to the hearts of many under-privileged Negro children through its weekly program of activities. Because of the crime and low morals which exist in this crowded and sordid environment, we feel that our Center is needed more than ever. Many of our children have no other Christian teaching or form of recreation. The work, play, and worship all have one aim, that of building strong Christian characters.¹⁰

Perhaps one of the most interesting human interest stories to emerge from the dusty files of the 1930s concerns a piano. It seems that Reverend Henninger of the Fifth Street Methodist Church, a well known church leader of the time, was able to secure a piano for the Deaconesses' apartment. Apparently, a Mr. Dickson, an executive of the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation in Pittsburgh, left it behind when he moved. Later on, this same Mr. Dickson sent \$10.00 to help move the piano, indicating that "he understands the Center is in one of the poorest districts and he does not wish to make it difficult for you to put the piano in service."¹¹ The Lord certainly does move in mysterious ways!

III

One of the chief concerns during the war years (and a number of other years) was a certain property directly across the street from the Methodist Mission that was notorious as a scene of vice. This property was referred to as the "Bucket of Blood" by local residents because about one homicide a month took place there. Parents warned their children not to go near the building on threat of punishment. However, a favorite neighborhood game became running in the front door, through the hall, and out the back door, to see "if you could get through unscathed, the hairs on the back of your neck standing up from fright."¹²

This notorious saloon obviously wasn't the only neighborhood problem, for Harrisburg newspaper editor Paul Beers wrote that, "Both Army and Navy threatened during World War II to put its (Pennsylvania) capital out of bounds because the venereal rate was so high." The same article goes on to say that, ". . . there were more than 100 prostitutes working Mulberry Street, Cherry Alley, Dewberry Alley, and up in 'The Ward' on Verbeke, Sixth and Seventh Streets."¹³

¹⁰*Fifty-seventh Annual Report 1937-38, Woman's Home Mission Society, 232.*

¹¹Correspondence, Neighborhood Center Files.

¹²Interview with Mrs. Bessie Braxton.

¹³Beers, 25.



Above photo: An immigrant family at 7th Street Methodist Mission est. 1920



At left: Miss Ula Garrison with neighborhood children 1938.

There are no follow-up reports in the Minutes as to what action, if any, was taken. The once famous "Bucket of Blood" was eventually demolished, together with the Methodist Mission's own building, for the widening of Seventh Street in the 1950s. It lives on only in neighborhood folklore and legend.

As the history of the Methodist Mission evolved, a change in perspective began to make itself felt. From an early sort of "benevolent paternalism," there began a move toward incorporating more and more neighborhood people into the work — as staff, board members and vocal participants. One example was the "Parents' Group" started in 1944. Its goal was to foster a better understanding between parents and teachers and to help parents with parenting skills and family problems.

On September 2, 1945, on the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay, General MacArthur formally received the Japanese surrender and the war was finally over. Soon the troops started coming home.

The ugly head of racism was obviously still an overt part of American society as evidenced by a situation reflected in the Mission Minutes of January 7, 1946:

Mrs. Greenawalt reported that Jack Trueitt, a returned service man, and also a product of the Mission, has been refused entrance into a Radar School. The President (of the Board) appointed the following committee to help the boy to enroll in such a school: Dr. Emory Hartman, the Reverend Frank Kimper and Miss Ula Garrison.¹⁴

By the mid 1950s, major urban renewal was forcing change on the Mission. Notification was received to vacate the Seventh Street building where the Mission was housed. The consensus of opinion grew that although the public housing planned for the newly developed area would be for low income families, in all likelihood most of the families then living in the area would not return, and that the mission work should be located elsewhere. With the aid of the Harrisburg Redevelopment Authority (a \$25,000 buy-out) the Mission was relocated in November 1958.

Reports issued by the Methodist Mission of Harrisburg during these years read like a neighborhood epitaph, documenting that the homes that had been bought from reluctant families for the urban renewal project were boarded up and reverted to city ownership. The heart of the neighborhood, which had been the families that had worked, shared and socialized together for years, was torn out to be replaced by vacant, boarded up structures, and a largely transient population. The entire redevelopment project was riddled with unexpected problems. For example, while the original plan called for both private and public housing through-out the area, public housing was later removed from the mix, creating another entirely segregated community.

¹⁴Minutes, Neighborhood Center Files, January, 1946.

One Mission report, dated January 9, 1958, summed up the problems of the time:

You who live in The South sometimes think you have serious problems to face in regard to integration. We have problems here too, sometimes it is a real fight, tooth and toenail, for the equality we so glibly talk about.¹⁵

Newspaper reporters have written that the one thing that Harrisburg and Washington, DC had in common in the 1950s was that in sight of the Capitol buildings was some of the worst housing possible. When former Deaconess Helene R. Hill, who served at the Methodist Mission from 1954 to 1961, was asked to comment she had this to say:

That's correct. I agree. You have to picture row houses, many solid brick — but they would be very deteriorated, with a cement step in front. Very small, crowded rooms, and kind of dark. . . . When we moved up to 610 Maclay Street there was outdoor plumbing left, a few outhouses. The streets were very crowded with very poor housing. It was the typical slum of an eastern city. That was all taken down in the urban renewal. When I first arrived they had already started the renewal so that in order to find some of the people that were listed as our families I was crawling over rubble. I would find one house left and there would be rubble all around from the demolishing of the houses.¹⁶

It seems that the Uptown section of Harrisburg suffered the same urban history as countless other cities across America during the 1950s and 60s, when the hopes and needs of the urban poor were sacrificed in the name of "progress." The old Seventh Street neighborhood simply disappeared and the area remained neglected until the 1980s when "urban pioneers" began partial reconstruction of the area.

It appears that from this period on, and maybe before, each Deaconess or Director of what was soon to be called Neighborhood Center had been keenly aware of the fact that minorities and the poor frequently feel that the decisions which affect their lives are beyond their control, and that, because of this, it is impossible for them to reach their full potential. Deaconess Hill cut to the heart of the Center's philosophy with the following statement:

We often hear the question asked, 'Why does the Church conduct such work as this? Do you teach the Bible? Are you teaching the children about religion?' This is not our function, but is the task of the Church itself, and the Sunday School. Our job is not to duplicate, but to supplement and to aid the work of the Church. We seek to teach the Bible in the form of persons — leaders who live the way of Jesus through their kindness and forgiveness, through their acceptance of each one, no matter who he is, or how bad or good. We try to give youngsters a group experience with a Christian leader who controls that experience in order to give each individual child the help he needs along the way to joyous, happy living.¹⁷

¹⁵Information of Methodist Mission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, January 9, 1958.

¹⁶Interview with Miss Helene Hill, November 12, 1987 and correspondence.

¹⁷Hill interview.

IV

The decade of the 1960s was tumultuously marked by the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the fear of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and a steady stream of urban unrest. In spite of all these world-making events, Neighborhood Center in Harrisburg continued, as it had in the past, to play a positive role for the betterment of people's lives, especially the lives of neighborhood children.

Considering the urban unrest that rocked the nation and Harrisburg during the Sixties, it is appropriate to review a local African-American history. While African-Americans lived in the area since the earliest pioneering days, it is clear that they have never been fully accepted as full participants in Harrisburg life. While anti-African-American sentiment has always existed in the community, it did not often take the form of overt bigotry, but was more likely characterized by an unmindfulness and disregard on the part of Whites.

Through the years, educational opportunity, jobs, and housing have neither been equal nor easily accessible for African-Americans in Harrisburg. They have not been barred outright from politics, churches, professional life and culture, but they were not readily accepted either, and, unlike the south, there was not even much tokenism.

The killing of King brought new urban outbreaks all over the country, including Harrisburg. Racial violence and bitterness, especially in 1968 and 1969, surfaced locally and two young people, one Black and one White were killed. Fear spread throughout the white community and the "White flight" exodus to the suburbs accelerated. By 1970, 30.7 percent of the city's population were African-Americans. The so-called "Harrisburg Riot" broke out on June 23, 1970 and continued with arson, false alarms, and arrests until quelled by State Police.

In all denominations, church leaders were very cognizant of the changing times and The United Methodist Church actively supported the Civil Rights Movement. At all levels, United Methodism was placing emphasis on new social programs for both minorities and the poor. In view of this struggle it is relevant to note that Neighborhood Center helped to organize and nurture a group called "The Uptown Civic Association" which, from its incorporation in 1961, continued to grow and assume more and more responsibility. Another neighborhood group, the Senior Citizens, was formed and operated out of the Center for several years. Today it has its own staff, building, and daily programming for seniors.

For many people, the decade of the 1970s is symbolized by the ending of the Vietnam War. As the entire nation turned away from war and toward self-examination, Neighborhood Center moved out into the neighborhood and the wider community. Staff members attended the Tri-County Welfare Council, sat on the Committee of the Harrisburg-Steelton

Highspire Vocational School, worked with student teachers in the Early Childhood program, and held membership in the Tri-County Nutrition Committee and the Hamilton Area Senior Citizens Council. Staff member Anita McLaughlin epitomized this new outreach, and for several months was on loan from the Center to the State Hospital to aid patients in establishing Social Security claims.

It is interesting to note that a young man named Nathan Baxter, who is today the Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, replaced Mrs. McLaughlin as Neighborhood Center's "community worker." Nathan Baxter's April 19, 1972 report sheds considerable light on his unique position:

I spend a great deal of time on the street and, as weather permits, I hope that this time will increase. Because of public rapport and identity, I have been able to find the problems of the individual case. We have been called on by individual parents outside of Uptown Harrisburg to find runaway children. We have been called on by Dauphin County Child Care for information and advice concerning particular parent-child relations. We have been instrumental in finding employment and job training for various unemployed individuals. Also getting a number of high school drop-outs back into public school and GED programs. . . . I hope that gradually the services of Neighborhood Center can be interwoven into the overall fabric of the many agencies aimed at meeting the problems of Uptown Harrisburg.¹⁸

V

By the fall of 1980 it was obvious to most people that the old building at 610 Maclay Street, which had seen almost three decades of hard use by the Center and which had been old when first purchased in the 1950's, was not going to be serviceable very much longer. The Department of Labor and Industry had already closed off the use of the third floor, and some people thought they should have closed the entire building.

Director Lenore Haas (October 1978–August 1988) must be credited with the initial vision to see a brand new facility that would lend itself to the quality programming that the Center was developing under her leadership. From the time that a Building Committee was formed in 1980, the United Methodist Women provided much of the needed credibility and stimulation. There can be no question that without the leadership and financial support of the United Methodist Women at all levels, the new building, which was dedicated on Sunday, September 9, 1984, could not have been built.

In the midst of the flurry of activity and effort of the Building Campaign and the construction of the new facility, life did go on at the Center. In fact, two new unique and creative programs surfaced. Under the personal direction of Executive Director Haas, a Prison Ministry was developed that ministered to the needs of persons at the Dauphin County Prison.

¹⁸Minutes, Board Meeting, April 19, 1972.

The other new program was Young Mothers Together, a support group for teenage mothers. This program was aimed at breaking the cyclical nature of teenage pregnancies, addressing the reasons for the problems faced by very young parents, seeking ways to improve self-esteem, and providing support through both individual and group counseling. Initially funded by the Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries and with support from a local United Methodist congregation, Young Mothers Together continues to be a valuable outreach of the Center and today is funded in part by the local United Way.

Throughout the late 1980's, financial struggles created some major constraints in the Center's ministry, and almost every Board meeting dedicated at least part of its agenda to dealing with rising costs, decreasing income, and a variety of other unexpected financial setbacks. A bright spot in the financial picture was the approval of the Central Pennsylvania Conference Board of Global Ministries to purchase some property near the Center for the development of a much-needed outdoor playground, and a successful campaign that raised over \$60,000 from the community for the project, which was completed in 1990.

Philosophically, the biggest news of the decade may have been the July 15, 1987 "Covenant Agreement" of relationship between Neighborhood Center and the National Division of the General Board of Global Ministries. This was a reaffirmation of Neighborhood Center's primary relationship and shared mission with The United Methodist Church. At the signing of the agreement, Sandra Swans of the National Division called Neighborhood Center "a model community center" within the United Methodist connection.

VI

Neighborhood Center has moved into the 1990's under the extremely capable leadership of Executive Director Daniel Welliver. Welliver is something of a product of the Center himself, having worked in the Center's Summer Day Camp program as a teenager. Although finding adequate financial resources remains a constant struggle, the Center's most valuable resource—its staff, volunteers, and participants—continue to show a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment.

Today, programs continue to emerge at Neighborhood Center as new needs are identified. Project H.O.M.E.S., a new program of hands-on home repair training and education, has been enthusiastically embraced by low- and moderate-income families who are finding opportunities for first-time home ownership. The project includes a tool lending library, and specialized educational seminars.

After ten years in a new building, the Center recently committed itself to moving out into the community through its new "Beyond Our Walls" initiative, which shares the Center's most experienced staff with other

neighborhood organizations and churches working to develop programming for children and youth.

Neighborhood Center of the United Methodist Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania remains a powerful Christian witness, and a unique and distinctly United Methodist mission outreach. As it has for over eight decades, Neighborhood Center faces a future of challenge and hope, struggle and faith.