

STM History: 1996-2006

Challenged by Williamsport District Superintendent, Paul Herring (1990-1996), a group of United Methodist clergy came together in 1994 to begin prayer-walking the city streets once a month. They simply called it: "Street Ministry." They wanted to see first-hand the places, the people and the activities of the city and to pray as they walked rather than pray from a distance in a building. They continued for years walking and praying over the city where God had placed them to serve His people.

Three years later, the Williamsport District Lay Leader, Joan Gordon, invited all the U.M. Church Lay Leaders to come and vision together. Thus, the Laity Empowerment Group, known as LEG -"symbolic for Walking Together"- was formed in the fall of 1997. First on the agenda for these laity, as well, was prayer that lasted an hour or more at every meeting as they sought God's direction regarding the burden He had placed on their hearts. God had burdened them to reach out for the disenfranchised and homeless of the city. How did God want it done?

These two ministries began to see they had the same goal in seeking God's will to provide for homeless and disenfranchised needs while bringing the good news of the gospel of Christ to transform their lives.



Larry Cole 1999-2004

About that time, Larry Cole felt directed to type up a full plan of ministry that came to him one night. He shared it with the clergy and the District Superintendent. It was to be like spokes going out from the hub of a wheel. People were to be plugged into needed ministry-spokes that are already in place and ministry-spokes were to be added for needs not yet met.

Guided by the new District Superintendent, Anthony Alexander (1996-2001), the partnership of the clergy-based Street Ministry and the Laity Empowerment Group began. Norm Coffman was assigned the job of coordinating the evolving journey under the new name, "Sojourner Truth Group Ministry." It was hoped that "the church without walls" was being formed. And, it was hoped that the Sojourner Truth name would speak for itself in attracting those in need because of Sojourner Truth's rich and colorful history of being a black woman slave who was freed and who, then, worked hard to abolish slavery, to advocate women's rights and to preach Jesus!

Sojourner Truth Group Ministry continued the "Neighborhood Prayer Walks" while developing the vision to reach the unchurched, minister to those in poverty and to heal the racism among the diverse ethnic groups by being a "church-without-walls" in the community." This partnership was also joined by Grace Unlimited, directed by Lenore Alexander, who's vision of a Christian prison ministry was to support prisoners both before and after being released.

The "Warm Fuzzy" outreach project was started in December, 1997. First, area churches and businesses were asked to donate "warm fuzzy" items and they gave generously. Then, a group of people walked the city streets, singing Christmas carols and, from the overflowing baskets they carried, handed out mittens, gloves, hats, and scarves to the needy. They, also, handed out candy canes, with the story of how the candy cane originated and what it signifies in the life of a Christian.

Sojourner Truth Group Ministry continued to follow God's calling, with regular prayer gatherings, prayer walks and visioning. They met in various churches within the Williamsport District, always listening for where God was leading them in this ministry.

In the summer of 1998, Sojourner Truth Group Ministry provided an “Outdoor Bible School” at the park near High Street UMC. They ministered to approximately 35 children with this outreach. In 1999, they provided a weekly Open Gym night at Calvary U.M. Church which offered an evening of recreational basketball for the older youth. Then, when the older youth brought the younger siblings in their care, a children’s program was created. And, Larry Halverstadt-Cole began casual contemporary worship services at Calvary on Friday evenings.

About this time, Sojourner Truth Group Ministry made the effort to gain support from the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church for this much needed ministry. Williamsport District Superintendent, Anthony Alexander, Ann Runnels and Joan Gordon traveled to the Conference office in the Harrisburg area. They met with the Bishop’s Cabinet, explained the outreach ministry, requested further prayers and acceptance of this new ministry and appealed for funding in order to pay the part-time salary for a Sojourner Truth pastor, the ministry visionary, Larry Cole. The funding was awarded and Larry was appointed.

Sojourner Truth Group Ministry also received support from several Williamsport area churches. In fact, seven became founding churches. They were High Street UMC, Wesley UMC, Calvary UMC, Grace UMC, Third Street UMC, Newberry UMC, and Faxon-Kenmar UMC. Lay and clergy representatives from these churches became the governing Board together with community representatives from other churches and from the disenfranchised community. By bringing a few people from numerous congregations together for these heart-felt ministries and the pooling of finances, Sojourner Truth Group Ministry believed that the group could do more ministry with combined resources than could be done as an individual or as a single congregation. Not only that, people who might not feel comfortable in a “regular” congregation would feel welcomed as family, become involved in volunteering and, possibly, come to Christ by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

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