

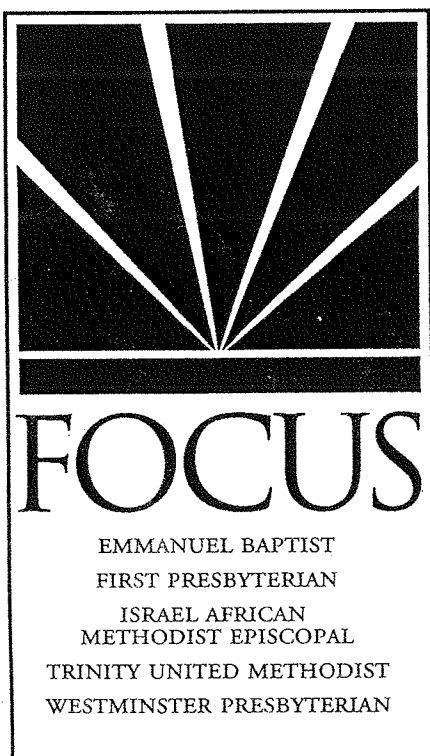
FOCUS

EMMANUEL BAPTIST ♦ FIRST PRESBYTERIAN ♦ ISRAEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST ♦ WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN



♦ ————— 25 Years ————— ♦
Welcome to the Celebration

SUMMER 1992



FOCUS

Interpreting
Our Common Ministry

So reads the logo of the first Focus newsletter, which ran quarterly between 1969 and 1972. As you see, we have borrowed it as the title for this anniversary issue. In fact, Focus itself, the 25 year adventure we celebrate on these pages, picked its name from that earlier publication.

Like the name, like so much that has happened in Focus in the last quarter century, this magazine has evolved from the contributions of many people. As is true of all Focus endeavors, it was born out of a need — in this case the need for communication among the five member churches — but it has grown in scope and depth far beyond our original concept as editors. After over a dozen extensive interviews, innumerable conversations, hours of digging through old files and minutes, and more hours observing projects and volunteers and committees, we're convinced beyond doubt that Focus is wealthy indeed in energy, love and practical faith. We've been thrilled to watch that dynamic at work, and our goal in this publication is to offer the entire Focus community the same gratifying vision of itself.

Still, any project worth its salt is filled with persistent tensions and problems. This has been a year of review for Focus, of close self-scrutiny and knotty questions about the future. Those, too, are ours to own together as a community. You'll find them here, without hedging, a rightful part of the whole celebration.

Journalists aim for objectivity, or so the notion goes. But objectivity, if stirred with too much zeal, cooks up a tasteless broth. We confess to a liberal sprinkling of subjectivity. "Interpreting our common ministry," declares our inherited logo. We have done some interpreting, and have urged our contributing writers to be more than just reporters. We hope that invites healthy dialogue.

Finally, our heartiest thanks to the many who have helped us — to the Focus Executive Council for its support, and to all those who have added their voices — writers and advisors and reactors. And particular thanks to those who so often feel voiceless, the families and individuals whom Focus serves, and who serve so richly in return.

*Shirley Nelson
Tom McPheeters*

Publisher

The Focus Executive Council

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Special thanks

To Ed Atkeson of Berg Design
for our front cover and the
logo.

To the church secretaries,
particularly Rebecca (Adams)
Doughty for the many extra
hours of typing.

*... you shall be called the
repairer of the breach, the
restorer of streets to dwell in.*

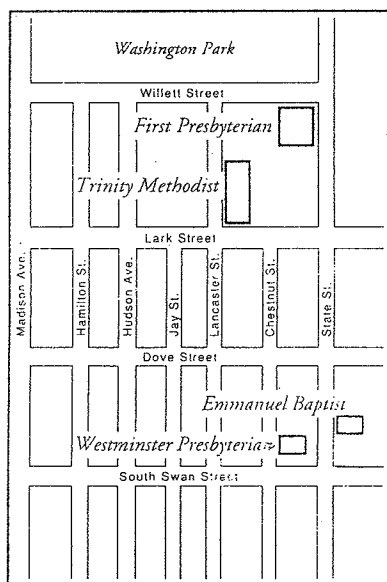
Isaiah 58:12



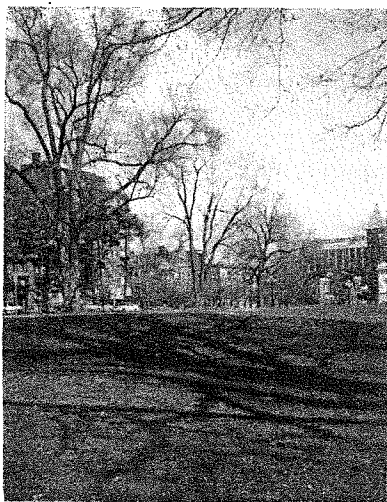


HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Three decades ago downtown Albany confronted radical change. In 1963, more than ten city blocks of old row houses were bulldozed to make room for a new complex of state offices, displacing thousands of low-income people. As pile-drivers shook the ground of Capital Hill in the mammoth construction process, the State also made public a proposal to build a six-lane mid-crosstown arterial from South Swan Street to Washington Park, cutting a swath directly through the middle of two residential neighborhoods. Wholly apart from these developments, four churches almost in the path of the proposed highway began making concurrent decisions of a more profound order.



The neighborhood of the four churches in the Sixties. The new highway was planned to run from South Swan Street and the Empire State Plaza office complex to Washington Park.

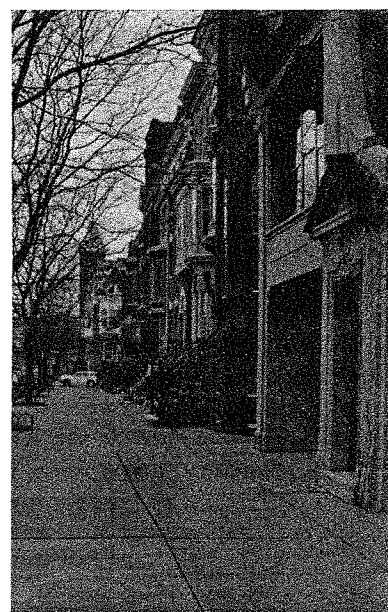


Before "Focus" — "Gaposis"

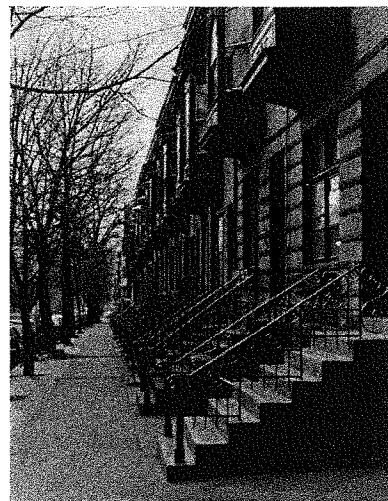
Located within a three-block radius of each other in historic Center Square, the churches represented three major mainline denominations — Presbyterian USA, United Methodist and American Baptist. The denominational differences were minimal compared to their commonalities. Each was old and well-established, with large middle class memberships, but in each case a good third of those members were over sixty years in age, while up to as many as half lived outside the downtown area.


Each church was dealing in its own style with the same questions. What were the best ways to serve the mixed society of a city? What was the most efficient use of their resources, particularly their spacious and beautiful buildings? And how could they continue to afford the increasingly expensive care of historically valuable architecture?

The questions presented themselves against the backdrop of the sweeping revolutions of the Sixties — the civil rights movement and the growing anti-war controversy. Throughout the country many churches were making new commitments to social responsibility and ecumenism. To date, the four



Typical Center Square houses. Above, Willett Street looking toward First Presbyterian Church. Below, "Brides Row" on Chestnut Street.





Center Square churches had interacted very little, other than sharing summer worship, and though all were concerned about the poverty that surrounded them, in 1965 they entertained no visions of sharing community ministry. That was to change remarkably in the next two years. It began separately and simultaneously behind the walls of each church.

In 1966 the Albany Presbytery initiated regular discussions by a group that called itself GAPOSIS — Greater Albany Presbyterians Organized for Strategy In Service. The intention of GAPOSIS was to bond city-wide Presbyterian congregations in geographic “clusters,” in order to develop common ministries.

In the decade of the sixties we were re-thinking the whole nature of ministry. All of us were being sensitized theologically to a new understanding of mission.



Robert Lamar
Senior Minister,
First Presbyterian
1958-1992

The Gaps Close

As a result, in January 1967, the two churches in Center Square — First Presbyterian and Westminster — formed a Joint Planning Committee. Led by their pastors, Robert Lamar of First and Jack Laske of Westminster, the Joint Planning Committee set about to recommend areas of worship, education and local mission they might approach in concert.

The move was significant, since the two churches were quite distinctive in their styles. Westminster believed the church ought to speak to its members, but not for them in society. First Presbyterian was convinced that the church ought to take a corporate public stand on issues that affected all society.

The first fruits of the Joint Planning Committee were an adult education forum and a combined Sunday School, as well as an idea that would not materialize for years to come — the hiring of a separate clergy person to supervise inner-city services.

But the JPC was not the only source of creative activity in downtown Albany in 1967. The Eighth Step Coffee House

I remember the closeness of the senior pastors. We had, among us, a real respect for one another and an appreciation of both our similarities and our differences.



Jack Laske
Senior Minister,
Westminster
Presbyterian
1959-1972

began operations in July of that year, under an inter-church committee chaired by Pickett Simpson, a young deacon at Emmanuel Baptist. Meeting two nights a week in a basement room at First Pres, the coffee house offered music and entertainment to college and high school clientele in a drug and alcohol-free environment.

In fact, running parallel with the Presbyterian program was an intense discussion within Emmanuel Baptist about its future as an inner-city congregation. Ralph Elliott, Emmanuel's newly called pastor — like Lamar at First — had already gained a reputation for being on the forefront of social causes in the city. Emmanuel intended to remodel its building for more practical, efficient use. Deep into a study of its goals, it invited the input of other downtown churches. Consequently, the Joint Planning Committee was “reconstituted” with a larger frame of reference to include the Baptists.

At the first meeting of the expanded JPC, someone asked an obvious question: Was there a chance that Trinity Methodist might like to participate? Trinity, the largest of the Center Square churches, had to date not publicly indicated any interest in urban mission planning.

But as it turned out, within Trinity a growing number of members had been urging the church to widen its sphere of ministry to meet the needs of poor residents in the neighborhood. Trinity's answer came back in the affirmative through its pastor, Bernard Grossman, and the JPC became a four-church endeavor in 1968.

“The Church on Capitol Hill,” Ralph Elliott called it, elatedly. But in the eyes of most the idea was not merger as much as a centralization of thinking, a grasp of the “whole picture” of the four-church operations. Very soon the JPC identified priorities, among them the creation of a commis-

Focus Highlights

March 1967 — Joint Planning Committee meets for the first time.

Summer 1967 — 8th Step Coffee House starts operation.

Fall 1967 — Emmanuel Baptist joins the JPC.

Spring 1968 — Trinity Methodist joins the cluster.

November 1968 — First joint worship of official coalition.

It was, and is, my understanding that ecumenicity is the “given” for the Church. The effort in growing toward the actualizing of the Biblical intention is still our call.



Ralph H. Elliott
Senior Minister,
Emmanuel Baptist
1964-1972



sion to study ways to act together in matters of public issue, and the formation of a Lay Academy, to prepare church members for the new work ahead.

"Suddenly we have been jolted . . ."

On the chilly Sunday morning of November 24, 1968, over 1200 persons packed the sanctuary of Emmanuel Baptist for the first joint worship service of the new coalition. It was a thrilling occasion, with standing room only, including the balconies. "Suddenly we have been jolted from our comfortable sleep of isolation," declared Ralph Elliott in a sermon titled "One God, One Church, One Mission." There were many hindrances to such oneness, he observed to the gathered congregations. "But you know where the major obstacle is and so do I. It is in physical things — buildings and property and institutions and investments — things which are not a basic part of the true church."

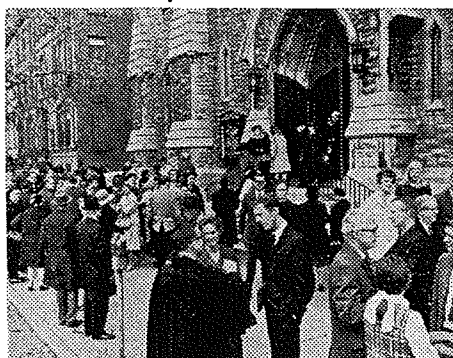
Yet above all, said Elliott, he was "advocating a unity which will emphasize diversity and protect the distinctiveness which each tradition contributes."

A report of the service appeared in the first coalition news letter, edited by James Miller, Associate Pastor at First Pres. Miller gave the new paper an intriguing name — FOCUS. Playful acronyms quickly developed: "Four Old Churches Under Stress," and "Four Old Churches United for Survival."

But survival was not the issue. These were not four dying churches, in spite of all the circumstances. By now, even the prospect of the State's new highway, fought vigorously by the Center Square Neighborhood Association, was losing its threat. The determinant issue for Focus was clearly mission.

"To be sure, you have heard it now until you are tired," said

Ralph Elliott, in his November sermon. "But hear it again until you believe it: 'The church exists as a fire exists by burning.' No burning — no fire. No mission — no church."



On the sidewalk after the first joint service

Focus is unique in its longevity and in its vitality. Most urban coalitions of churches have come and gone, but Focus has grown in program and purpose. Do you know what a treasure you have?

Happy Birthday!



Keith Russell
Assistant Minister,
Emmanuel Baptist
1971-76;
Senior Minister,
1976-78

Presbyterians Eye Merger

By Dwight Smith

In the spring of 1969, soon after the four Center Square churches began discussing the structural framework of Focus, the two Presbyterian churches began formal discussions about the possibility of merging.

One reason for this was the proposed new State highway, which particularly threatened the future of First Presbyterian. Another was the steady attrition of members and funds in both churches — in fact, in mainline churches nationally. Though the loss of numbers had only substantially begun in the Focus churches, it placed an onus on the Presbyterians to unionize now out of strength, rather than later out of necessity.

The future of each church was a concern to all four. Emmanuel, in spite of its earlier hope of forming one "Church on Capital Hill," was now opting for an ecumenical ministry from a Baptist base. Bob Stone, who chaired the union committee, assured Emmanuel that Presbyterians would "continue to share a deep interest . . . in our common ministry."

On November 25, the Plan of Union Committee voted unanimously for a merger of the two Presbyterian congregations at the Westminster site, safe from the ravages of the proposed highway. The Session at Westminster approved the plan. The Session at First Presbyterian recommended further study. When it became clear shortly thereafter that the highway proposal had been defeated, the merger effort died as well. It was not revived.

Significantly, the minutes of the union committee reveal that the merger discussions emphasized organizational "Hows" of union, not theological "Whys." Little was said about mission outreach, because the pressing and practical "Why" of merger was actually the threat of the highway project. The record stands in remarkable contrast to the concepts and motivations that were central to the birth of Focus.

In a larger sense, this episode reveals that Focus had already begun to serve a critical but unvoiced need within the four churches and to resolve a tension not yet articulated. For church members, Focus was a "safety valve" for those who were loyal to congregational roots but wanted to be engaged in more active outreach. For the churches themselves, Focus was a method by which to incorporate that opportunity without risking divisive internal restructuring. Focus thus became the means of pulling and stretching the four churches in ways otherwise unlikely, given the institutional inertia of individual congregations.

Dwight Smith, a member of First Presbyterian for 24 years, recently chaired the church's Task Force on Anticipating the Future.



Ready, Get Set . . .

Now it was time to begin. Everybody agreed. "There was excitement and energy," remembers Jim Miller, "a clear sense that together we could do things we could not do alone."

Yet nothing happened. Though the Coffee House continued strong and Focus sat "poised on the brink of some very significant program," as the newsletter reported, it would be another two years — 1971 — before it could claim another lasting project as its own.

Late in 1969, the organizational body of Focus was restructured as PARC, the Planning and Review Council. Made up entirely of church members, with "ministerial resources," PARC set in place five commissions centering in the elderly, the young, urban life, the "gathered community" (the four congregations), and "structure and staff."

Too Much Government?

The designs for church cooperation were very specific. For instance, no new staff were to be hired at any church and no more than \$10,000 spent on any church buildings without consulting one another. "We were over-structured," says Art Buell, a PARC officer at the time. "Our decisions impacted potentially on the independence of the churches, and they backed off from those promises pretty quickly."

None of this dampened enthusiasm. Several activities were initiated, including an after-school program. The Lay Academy escalated into an ambitious educational program which went on ice when Jim Miller, its innovator, accepted a pastorate in Utica. Though these plans led short lives, PARC meetings, often running late into the night, were vibrant with ideas and vision. Housing, racial relations, the Gay Liberation Front, meals for the elderly, the overwhelming problems of the young — all cried out for deliberation.

In 1971 the Focus budget of \$11,625 generously met requests for support from a fledgling intervention program for youth called Refer Switchboard, as well as for the Washington Park Free Medical Clinic and the Harris Club at Trinity, which offered classes in sewing and cooking to inner-city girls. Yet none of these could be called "Focus projects."

Then, that September, when the Attica Prison rebellion left thirty-nine dead and almost a hundred others wounded,

Our neighborhoods and churches would be very different today if it were not for Focus. Focus helped to change the face of the neighborhoods and the churches themselves.



Arthur Buell
Chair of PARC,
1970-1971

a small group at First Pres structured a noon-hour study series to examine the criminal justice system of the State. Out of that, the Task Force for Humanity in Justice was formed, with Irene Jackson, a First Pres member, as coordinator. This hard-working entity was to develop into a genuine and lasting Focus endeavor.

Two years later, a family weekend retreat at Silver Bay in the Adirondacks turned out to be a glowing success and would be repeated each September for nearly a decade. By now, too, Meals-on-Wheels was operating out of Trinity, a Task Force on Media Ministry sponsored three local radio and TV programs. As well, the Focus Committee on Urban Affairs, chaired by Dorman Avery, had identified six issues before the New York State Legislature, calling for an end to discrimination against minority groups, women and the elderly.

The Task Force for Humanity in Criminal Justice worked for eight years supporting prison reform legislation. We led Focus studies on the justice system and even arranged a "go to jail" experience for Focus members.

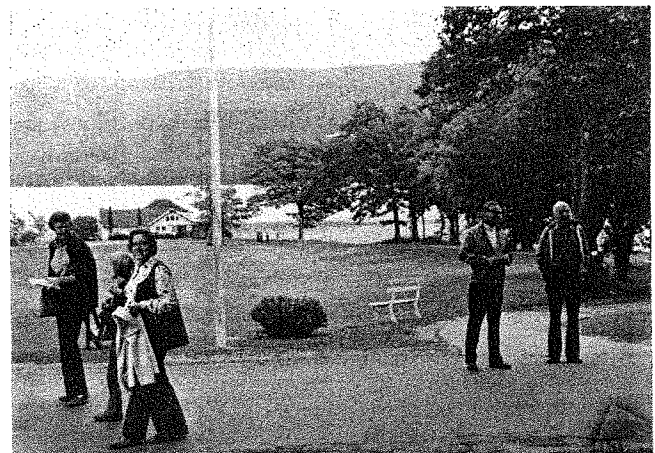
Irene Jackson
Chair,
Task Force for Humanity
in Criminal Justice

A True Focus

Still, many members of the churches were concerned that Focus had turned out to be largely a funding agency for other people's ideas.

Actually, something rather remarkable was happening. The four churches had slipped into a centralizing role for many of the new humanitarian endeavors springing up around them. It had become a true focus in downtown Albany, a part of urban life on a deep and genuine level.

But questions were regularly asked: Is this real ministry? Are we doing it right? What else should we do?



Focus retreat at Silver Bay on Lake George, circa 1976.



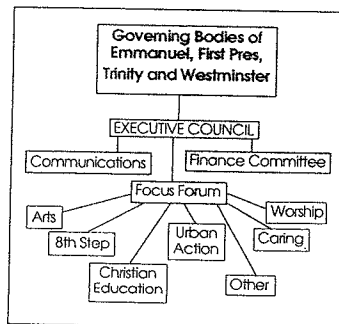
To seek out answers, a review process called "Focus Forward" was introduced, with Bob Pierce of the Schenectady Inner City Mission as consultant. The goals of that evaluation had by now developed a familiar ring: more clearly defined objectives, better communication between churches, educational programs, and wider use of church facilities.

Structures don't make things happen. People make things happen. But the genius of Focus is simply that it created such a climate that when something came up, the vehicle was there to get it off the ground.

Bring Back the Clergy

There were other problems, too. While PARC had been formed to reduce top-heavy clergy involvement, now the need was felt for more ministerial guidance. At the same time, the volunteer force had been depleted by an attrition in church attendance across the board. PARC was replaced by the Focus Executive Council, narrowing the decision-making base to the senior ministers and two representatives from the governing bodies of each of the churches.

The Council was charged with administration, planning, priority setting, evaluation and finances of the ministry. The new structure visualized itself like this:



The centerpiece of the chart above, the "Focus Forum," threw an important democratic principle into the more bureaucratic structure. Meeting bi-monthly, every task force, committee and Focus-supported activity gave a report to the Council and to each other. But more, the Forum was open to every member of the churches and to any interested group or individual from the wider community, all of whom were encouraged to present proposals and concerns. "It was enormously stimulating to hear these stories," Bob Lamar recalls.

Though the Forum was discontinued in time, out of its ferment three new Focus projects were born — the Kairos

Center for Care and Counseling, held throughout the week at Emmanuel; the Focus Food Pantry, housed at Trinity; and the annual Focus Institute, a Lenten evening school with a variety of seminars.

The First Community Minister

In 1979, Focus entered a third distinctly different phase. The first planting of the Community Garden between Hudson and Jay Streets led to the hiring of a full-time "Street Minister," Andy Russ, a young Union Seminary graduate. The work of the Street Minister was meant as exactly that — a pastor to those who lived in the shadow of the four churches, yet who remained outside the church, often lost in the cracks between all Focus efforts. In 1980, the Focus budget of \$20,000 was

I can still remember the first night of the Institute. Would people come? I paced around in the entrance to Westminster as people began to arrive. I didn't go to a class that night. I just wanted to enjoy watching everyone

arrive, sign up, and head off to the right room. The noisy entrances quickly gave way to the quiet of 200 people learning together. Once again Focus had provided a ministry that otherwise wouldn't have happened.

Dick Fiete
Assistant Minister, First Presbyterian
1974-1978

Course Offerings, First Focus Institute

Contemporary Theology
Assertiveness Training
Albany Through Three Centuries
Gospel Narratives
Rethinking Revolutionary Values
People of God in the Old Testament
Enrollment: 142

More Focus Highlights

January 1969 — First issue of Focus Newsletter appears. Reorganization of JPC as PARC.

1972 — Task Force for Humanity in Criminal Justice formed.

1973 — First Silver Bay retreat.

1974 — First review process; PARC replaced by Focus Executive Council.

1976 — Organization of Food Pantry, Kairos Center for Care and Counseling, and Focus Institute.

1979 — Focus Community Garden leads to street ministry.



relegated almost entirely to the salary of the new staff member, and it was the Street Minister who now became the central factor of the Focus presence in the city.

That change coincided with other changes in downtown Albany. By this time, many residents of the immediate neighborhoods were home-owners. The number of rental units was sharply reduced and available apartments priced well above the reach of former tenants. Andy Russ and a group of neighbors and church members, determined to "keep" low-income residents in the gentrifying areas, formed Albany Area Housing Opportunities in 1981, under the aegis of the Focus Churches.

But by now any effort to plug the holes in the predicament of the jobless and homeless seemed little more than a finger in the dike. Rich Guralnick, following Andy Russ as Street

Part of my dream was to extend Kairos in such a way that we were training lay people for a caring ministry that went beyond just counseling. People came who felt more comfortable with us than with a professional agency.

Carolyn Garvin, CSW
First Director, Kairos Center for Care and Counseling

Minister, instituted a winter breakfast program at Westminster Presbyterian for those who wandered the city, while the clientele at the Food Pantry at Trinity doubled and tripled. Today Kevin Wansor, as Community Minister, continues to lead the churches in these efforts.

In recent years the Focus Institute, Kairos, Silver Bay and the Task Force for Humanity in Justice have all been phased out, for one reason or another. As economic conditions in the country have worsened, Focus projects have tended to concentrate on matters of basic survival for the poor. While no one argues the

Ted Miller's Garden

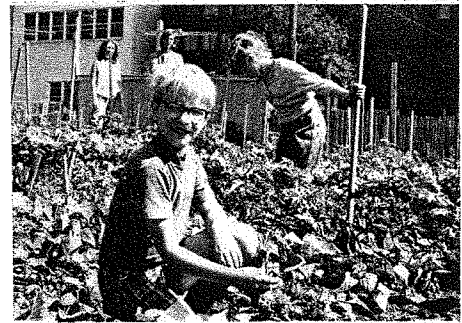
"What's 'at?" asked Joey, coming through the fence to my garden on lower Lancaster, pointing to a half dozen tomatoes in a basket. Before I could answer he was already picking up a hoe. The handle was twice his height. "Can I help?" he asked. That day the seed of the idea got sown.

A year later, the spring 1978, after lots of Saturday morning meetings of the new Street Ministry Committee, the Focus Community Garden was planted for the first time in the unused land between Hudson Ave. and Jay Street, exactly where the proposed State highway was once meant to go. The work of the garden became the first occasion of bringing together families of the neighborhood with families from the churches.

By the time we could present Mayor Erastus Corning with a basket of produce from our first harvest, the garden idea had already blossomed into a full-time street ministry. We never planted any mustard seeds, but the deeds that were planted on that plot of ground have yielded more than a hundred fold.



Ted Miller
Assistant Minister,
Westminster Presbyterian
1974-1980



More Highlights

- 1981 — Albany Area Housing Opportunities funded.
- 1984 — Breakfast program begins.
- 1990 — Stars and Bells adopted as Focus program.
- 1991 — Focus review process established.



I recall walking up rickety Lancaster Street stairs into a potential crisis, with a frying pan and a jar of jelly flying out the door to greet me.

I recall AAHO, the Emergency Food Task Force at birth, Christmastime evictions, rats, seeing food, housing, poverty and other issues become a part of the Focus dream.

The poor may always be among us. It is comforting to know that Focus will always be among them.

Happy Anniversary!



Andrew Russ
First Street Minister
1979-1982

necessity of that, the old questions have been surfacing again. Is this our ministry? Are we doing it right? What's missing? What else can we do?

Yet Focus must have been doing a great deal right after all, because it is now one of the longest lasting ecumenical clusters for mission in the country. It has lived on through rather drastic alterations, watching its active membership drop by almost 2,000, and as many as 35 clergy come and go. Over the years, scores of organizations and individuals have received direct help of one kind or another from Focus while the churches have offered meeting space to close to two hundred local support groups and not-for-profits.

If Focus hasn't, by some standards, made all the best moves, at least it has kept moving, always open to stretching and growth.

So let's get on with the story of how that is happening today.

Focus was the one thing with the necessary appeal to draw me so far from Virginia. It set Westminster apart from the other churches I was considering.



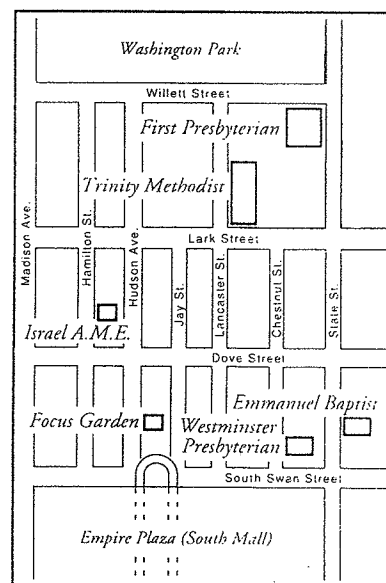
Betty Sutherland
Associate Minister,
Westminster
Presbyterian

The history of Focus has been gathered and written by Shirley Nelson, with help from Dwight Smith, Robert Lamar, Harold Rubin (Center Square Neighborhood Association) and Grace Ann Goodman's monograph, "The Capitol Hill Churches of Albany, NY — Steps Toward a Cluster, 1967-69." We regret the lack of space to mention by name the dozens of clergy and hundreds of volunteers and participants who built this history.

Now We are Five! ... Old Churches, United in Service

In 1988, the Israel African Methodist Episcopal Church at 381 Hamilton St. was welcomed into Focus, adding not only another church, but an important dimension in the coalition's identity.

Israel is the oldest black church in the Albany area, founded in 1828 with 25 members. The A.M.E. denomination traces its initiation to 1787, when segregated seating in a Philadelphia Methodist church provoked a protest march — out of the sanctuary — by a handful of black worshippers. Today the denomination emphasizes the priority of being a "total Christian citizen" in every way — in family, church, community and nation.



Location of the five Focus churches and the Focus garden.

The Connection

The connection to Focus began with Israel's former pastor, James Lawrence. We called Rev. Lawrence in Buffalo, where he is now pastor of the Agape A.M.E. church. "What can you tell us about how Israel happened to join Focus?" we asked.

"Oh, it all started with Rich Guralnick," he said.

Rich Guralnick was Focus Community Minister while Lawrence was Israel's pastor. Knowing nothing about Focus activities, Israel had organized its own food pantry. Rich checked to see if Focus could help, and out of that connection a dialogue developed. Soon Lawrence met the remaining Focus clergy. In another year Israel "enthusiastically endorsed" the union.

There was a time when Lawrence himself saw no need for inter-action with white congregations. In the Albany pastorate, surrounded by a racially mixed neighborhood, he realized that Israel could not function in isolation. "The Gospel became refocused for me," he added. "We are all brothers and sisters in Christ."

Now Lawrence is talking to other churches in Buffalo about the possibility of a new cluster for mission in that city.



ISRAEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL

Portrait of the Church Today

By Grace T. Green

*"How lovely is Thy dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty".*

This year marks the 170th year of service for Israel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Albany. Israel Church stands as a continuing beacon of spiritual light on the

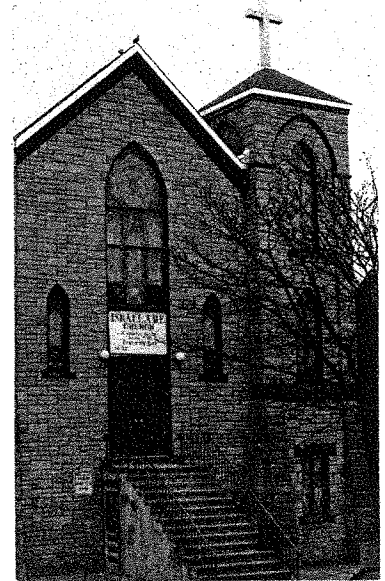
underground railroad during slavery and the Civil War, through the Civil Rights movement up to the present day and into the future.

"Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young, a place near your altar ..."

Israel's sanctuary seats approximately 300 worshippers. Sunday School classes, Wednesday Bible classes, prayer meetings, youth programs and choir rehearsals are all held in the sanctuary. Israel hosts community services as well, such as an annual NAACP meeting and a commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday.

From Monday through Friday an after-school community service project for potential high school dropouts operates at Israel Church from 3 to 6 p.m. in the Church Fellowship Hall. Young people do their homework in safety and quiet, and receive tutoring and counseling.

In 1990, Israel received a Social Action Project award for its ministry to the elderly. The senior citi-



zens program meets on Wednesdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., including the noon meal. Sunday breakfasts, brunches, bakesales and dinners are frequent occurrences in the Fellowship Hall.

"Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you."

Israel's membership includes families which boast of five generations of traceable membership. Some individual memberships date back as much as 60 and 70 years. The African-American concept of

Address: 381 Hamilton St.

Telephone: 463-8779

Founding date: 1829

Clergy: Harold L. Rutherford, pastor

Music Director: James Powell

Church School Superintendent: Lorene G. Tucker

Membership: 325

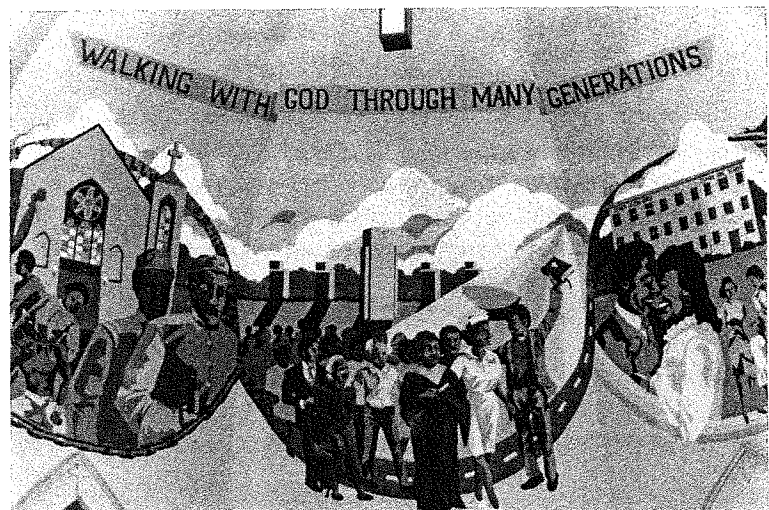
Average Attendance: 150

Community Service: After-school training program, senior projects, food pantry, Black history courses, "adoption" of homeless families.

same land purchased in 1854 on Hamilton Street between Lark and Swan Streets.

The Israel Church of today is closely connected to its historical past through its belief in God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the translation of this belief into the brotherhood of mankind through community and church service. The goals, objectives and programs of Israel A.M.E. Church today are steeped in that rich historical background and are still based upon a people's need for freedom of expression in religion, treatment with dignity as human beings, and the right to own and operate a religious establishment.

A painted mural above the front wall of the Church depicts the history of Israel Church from its days of serving as a station on the



The mural behind the altar in the sanctuary represents the past, present and future of Israel A.M.E.



Young people studying at Israel after school.

the extended family operates in showing respect for the elderly, and in the care of the young. It is common to hear the sounds of children throughout the service. All members feel free to comfort a crying child, quiet a fretful baby, or attend to the needs of a restless youth during worship.

"I will sing to the Lord for He is highly exalted . . . The Lord is my strength and song; He has become my salvation."

The music in Israel Church is an integral part of the spirited worship service. The adult choir sings a combination of anthems composed by Europeans, Methodist hymns, gospel soul, rock contemporary and Negro spirituals. Most music is characterized by a soulful beat and accompanied by swaying and handclapping. Until recently the choir was also accompanied by the violin playing of Mr. Julius Wilson, a long-time member of Israel A.M.E. Church until his death.

The combined youth choir, the H.L.R. Praise Ensemble, has been acclaimed in the Capital District for its talented singing and excellent directorship in television and public appearances.

The pastors of Israel A.M.E. Church are itinerant ministers ap-

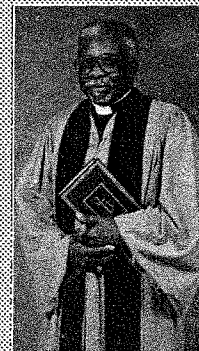
pointed by the Bishop of the Episcopal District for a term determined by the Bishop. Throughout the history of Israel Church the average tenure of a pastor has been two years. The present pastor, Rev. Harold L. Rutherford, has been at Israel Church for three years. As an itinerant minister, Pastor Harold must work in the church and community while mindful that he may be called to another church assignment at the end of the conference year or during the year, if the Bishop's program requires his service elsewhere.

Pastor Harold's sermons are accompanied by the call and response that is traditional in African American Churches and related to the West African heritage. As the minister speaks, the congregation answers. The responses are words of encouragement or suggestions for what the minister or members should say or do. Hand clapping or feet patting may also be heard during the sermon. The overall effect is a

Black people expect a worship service to give strong spiritual help. People come to church with big problems. Maybe you've got a Ph.D. in the congregation and maybe you've got a scrub woman. It doesn't matter. Both come with problems and they expect some food for the heart, a chance to give vent to emotions and tensions. That's a leveler. To God we are all the same — why not worship together as equals? Israel offers spirituality and permission to express ourselves.

We don't have time for "no big and no small."

Harold L. Rutherford



"rhythmic" interaction of minister and congregation which builds into a climax of spirituality followed by a peaceful calm. The order of service, however, is Methodist in format.

Israel Church is moving and growing. God's plans for the church are being revealed through prayer and Bible study. As the world changes, as the economy changes, as the needs of people change, Israel Church may find itself returning more and more to its historical and traditional ways of serving God and mankind.

The author thanks those who responded to the church survey. Special thanks to Edna Jackson and to my husband, Elmer L. Green, for their help, and to all for their prayers.



The Focus community worships at Israel A.M.E. on Ash Wednesday, 1992.



TRINITY UNITED METHODIST

An Extended Family

By Roger Green

When I was asked to provide a summary of what Trinity United Methodist Church is all about I went into a brief panic. Then I thought about the good people of

treats people.

- A place where I am natural as a human being both spiritually and socially.

- Permission to express my beliefs.

- An environment for my growth in the search of who God means me to be, a place that helps create the guidelines for my living.

- A church whose support of the Day Care Center makes me proud.

- Spiritual renewal — a place to re-charge one's spiritual battery.

- A retreat from the week's business.

- A large church that makes a great effort to include children and families in worship, including those who normally would not participate in any type of Christian organization.

- My roots. There is priceless assurance that in time of trouble, Trinity would be by my side, because we are family.

- A lifetime of spiritual enrich-



ment, with friendships and relationships spanning 70 years.

For myself, most of these elements apply, although my 70th anniversary of attending Trinity does not occur until the year 2052. Since my parents and one sister are in North Carolina, and another sister in California, I have counted on and received the caring support of the Trinity congregation, sharing meals, songs, joys and sorrows.

Trinity's spirit is epitomized in the church's mission statement,

Address: 215 Lancaster Street.

Telephone: 463-1293

Founding dates: As Wesley Chapel, 1833; in present building, 1931

Clergy: Maurice E. Drown, Senior Minister

James Snedeker, Associate

Music Director: Erik Strand

Christian Education: Marlene Shilling

Membership: 650

Average Attendance: 140

Host to: Adult Children of Alcoholics, Zelig Interfaith Peoples Society

Home to: Focus Food Pantry, Trinity Day Care Center, American Institute of Architects, Coalition for the Homeless, The Episcopal Seat of the Albany Episcopal Area, United Methodist Church



Maurice Drown



James Snedeker

Trinity and how I could ask them to help me in this rather pleasant task. Sure enough, I received many responses.

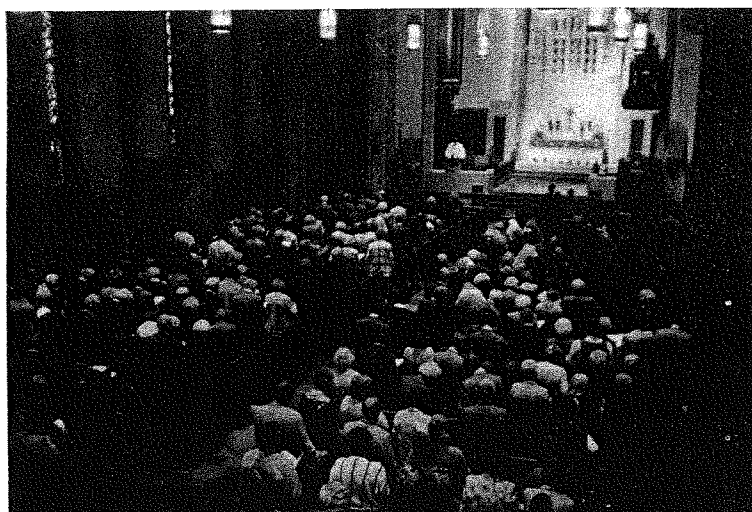
The people of Trinity say that Trinity is:

- My church family — my "connections of mutual support."

- My home away from home.

- A welcoming cosmopolitan fellowship—diversified ethnically, economically and socially.

- A place I come to where love and faith and respect are the basis for how I am treated by others — true reflections of the way Christ



Focus joint worship at Trinity, Oct. 30, 1991.



Trinity's Community Meal

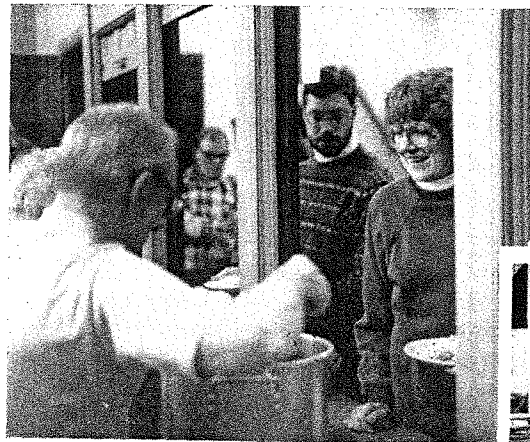
Trinity's Thursday night Community Meal for the church and the neighborhood is easily the best deal in town — presently \$3, children free, no one turned away. Fran Colby, who originated the idea, has been Chief Cook for more than 15 years, with a crew of assistants and "bottle washers."

The meals are typically pasta dishes or casseroles,



Chief cook Fran Colby relaxes after her kitchen duties are done.

but always with a distinctive "homecooked" taste that often has diners asking Fran for her recipes. The food, and the sense of community, draw upwards of a hundred people each Thursday evening.



Fran, a retired professor of English at the State University at Albany, where she also acted as faculty advisor to campus Christian activities, has been a member of Trinity for 44 years. There are few roles in the church she has not filled.

"I've done everything except sing in the choir," she says. "Singing is something I can't do." Currently she is president of the Board of Trustees.



Browsers look through merchandise at "Trinity's Treasures," the church's used clothing store.

passed at the annual conference on December 9, 1991:

To be an open, diverse and compassionate community of people whose central meanings in life are found and renewed in the person and work of Jesus Christ: a community whose

gathering is to celebrate the presence of God, to share what the saints of the Church have taught, to join hands in solidarity with other communities of faith and to participate in the renewal of God's creation in the Capital District of New York State and

throughout the whole earth.

The church's outreach into the community, both through its various connections (Methodist, Focus, Council of Churches), and as a single unit through the efforts of individual members speaks volumes about the manner in which Trinity United Methodist Church assumes its role in the city.

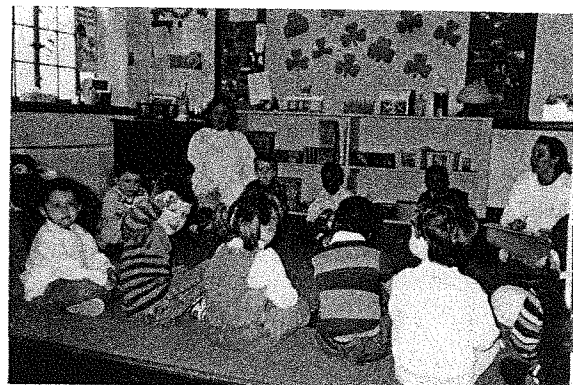
Roger Green has been a member of Trinity for eight years. He sings in the Chancel Choir and is chair of the Administrative Board.

There is a certain constancy in a congregation formed as a mission church by diverse Christians nearly 160 years ago, whose identity is still shaped by mission, diversity and inclusiveness today. While staying true to the best in Methodist heritage, Trinity knows herself as a congregation providing ecumenical leadership in the community and compassionate social and spiritual ministry with the surrounding neighborhood. Vital worship is first in our life together, while Christian education is both our main ministry and mission.

Most of us know our church as a caring congregation in which we keep in touch, and truly do bear one another's burdens. Urban ministry is a struggle just to stay even, but in these trying times Trinity is not only keeping up, she's growing. We just thank God for all these blessings and seek God's power in continuing to discern and fulfill God's will in the days ahead.

Trinity is a great place to find God and live faith.

Maurice E. Drown



Sixty-two children are enrolled at Trinity's Day Care Center.



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN

A Servant Church in a Changing World

By Irene Jackson

First Presbyterian Church has come a long way since donating lead from its steeple and windows to be made into Colonial Army bullets during the American Revolution. It's been a long time, too,

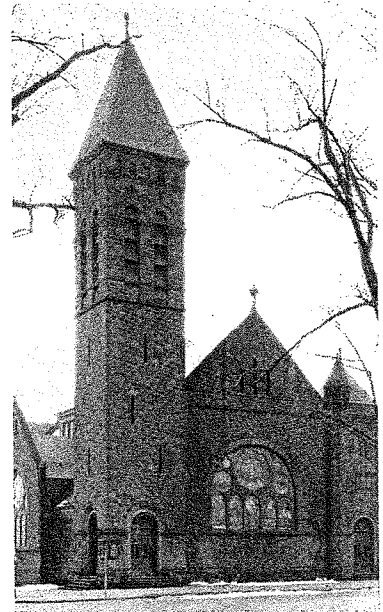
members and staff concentrate much more on relationships and mission than on the building or the church's history.

I discovered this with a series of questions designed to elicit positive and negative expressions from both members and staff.

What do you like about First Pres?

"Its diversity," answered the greatest number of people, both members and staff. Joyce Bascom, a member of 18 years, explained it as "a community of individuals of all ages and several races and backgrounds trying to understand God's mission for us." Worship at First Pres is real and life-related, said many. Most considered the "concerns microphone" — the period in which anyone may come to the front of the church and speak — as an extremely important part of the service.

Many members expressed pride in the national as well as local leadership of Bob Lamar, senior minister for the past 33 years — most notably his roles as moderator of the General Assembly and as co-chairman of the committee which worked to bring about reunion of the southern and northern sectors of the Presbyterian



denomination.

I asked Bob Lamar himself what he liked about First Pres. "Its environment," he said, "in which preaching is appreciated and challenged."

Associate Pastor Gailey McIntyre calls First Pres a church "not constrained within its walls; it moves in and out of the walls as its active members carry their faith in for strength, encouragement, renewal and transformation, and then

Address: State and Willett Streets

Telephone: 449-7332

Founding date: 1763

Clergy: Robert C. Lamar, Senior Minister (retiring June 1992)

Gailey McIntyre, Associate Minister and Christian Education Coordinator

Director of Music: David Griggs-Janower

Membership: 739

Average attendance: 315

Host to: Epilepsy League, Peace Breakfast, International Women, Equinox Thanksgiving Dinner

Home to: Eighth Step Coffee House, N.Y. State Council of Churches, N.Y. State Coalition for Criminal Justice



Bob Lamar



Gailey McIntyre

since a duel between parishioners Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr resulted in Hamilton's death, and the funeral discourse of pastor Eliphalet Nott contributed to passage of a national law outlawing dueling in the United States. As well as the hapless duelers, noteworthy communicants during First Presbyterian's 228-year history include three governors, four commissioners of education and two State Supreme Court justices.

The present brownstone building at State and Willett Streets is known for its Tiffany stained glass windows. But the church's mem-



The Equinox Thanksgiving Dinner, held every year at First Pres, a free meal for as many as 1,500 guests. Equinox is a non-profit crisis intervention service in Albany.



For nearly thirty years First Pres has been influenced by the image of the Servant Church. At the time of its 200th anniversary in 1963 the congregation engaged in a serious study venture of the Church in relation to the culture. There was considerable theological discussion in the wider church at that time about the Servant Church and the Servant Lord. This imagery worked its way into the thought and life of First Pres through sermons, the formation of a Servant Company, and the reading and discussions arising out of many programs. When this got coupled with new forms of involvement in the community during the '60's, the sense of being a

servant church in a changing world grew and eventually claimed the congregation in a powerful way.

Some of this was happening in other churches, particularly those in urban situations where the commitment to be an urban church marked the way worship and outreach were experienced. We would not claim the distinctive of the servant image as ours alone — we share its vision with the other Focus Churches in many ways. But in our particular journey this has been a significant way to think about our calling and our way of being the church of Jesus Christ in our time.

Robert Lamar

out into the world.”

What do you feel is lacking at First Pres?

A large number of those questioned, including the ministers, cited the obvious lack of a strong high school program. One mentioned lack of a young adult singles group, another would like an adult church school class, and a third misses overnight retreats.

Some would like to see more community outreach to attract new members; one wants more thorough preparation for new members joining the church. Some miss the Focus Institute, in which Bible study was offered.

What positive changes have you seen since coming to First Pres?

The rotation system and service of women on the boards since 1958 (now approximately half the total on each), and women in the pulpit for the past twelve years, have resulted in more democratic leadership, said many. New programming for all ages, prayer groups, care chains, and adult forums ranked high as recent changes, along with the new hymnal, Bibles in the pews, and “getting rid of the Styrofoam cups.”

But no doubt the most important change occurred in 1963, when — in Bob Lamar’s words — “turning ourselves out to the needs of the world as a ‘servant church in a

changing world’ became the church’s intentional posture following its 200th anniversary celebration.”

It was that decision, 29 years ago, which makes First Pres today what Laura Greene describes as “an outgoing and outgiving church,” and Ken Rawley as “an eclectic group of sincere and empathetic

people, poor to rich, who worship together and put their faith into action.”

Says Jacinta Kimuli Sebagala, a native of Uganda, “it is a church that attempts to meet people’s needs, regardless of who they are.”

A member of First Presbyterian for 42 years, Irene Jackson is an ordained elder and sings in the choir.

One First Presbyterian Family

Sandra and Hector Camacho, originally from Puerto Rico and active in the Albany Hispanic community, joined First Pres in 1981. Since then the entire family has contributed to the life of the church. Both parents and two of the children have taught in the Sunday School. Hector is a member of the Session and Sandra currently serves on the Board of Trustees. Audry, who has also been a Deacon, plays with the Willett Ringers Handbell Choir. Benjamin has updated the computer in the church office, and Kaleb’s artwork is included in the most recent church brochure. Margaret has returned to Albany after a period in Atlanta, where she married Terry Hunt. Their two boys enjoy Sunday School.



Standing from left, Sandra, Hector, Benjamin and Kaleb Camacho, and Terry Hunt. Seated, Audry Camacho and Margaret, Cody and Dustin Hunt.



EMMANUEL BAPTIST

A Caring Church in the Heart of the City

By Ron MacLean

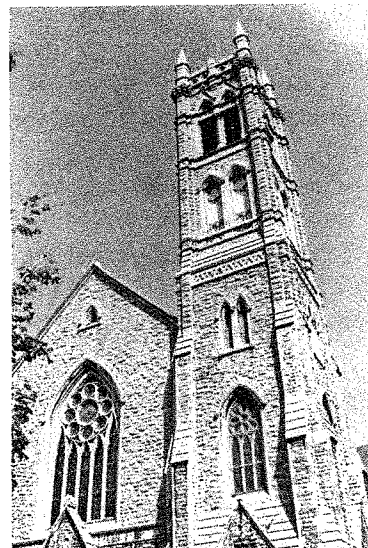
My wife Barbara and I joined Emmanuel Baptist Church a year ago, after moving to Albany from Los Angeles. We visited more than a dozen churches in the Capital District before trying Emmanuel. We left the service there with a sense that the many people who had introduced themselves were genuinely interested in each other, and in us. You don't see that in many places. It's not a concern that

can think of," says Pastor Roy Donkin. "There's a wonderful object lesson in that. We can be different colors and backgrounds and theological stripes and still come together to do something worthwhile. Part of our mission is to create that atmosphere, to lift it up not as an option but as an imperative."

"We have a unique profile," says church member Janet Franklin. "Most churches are homogeneous — ours is anything but. . . . There's the whole gamut of people, of backgrounds, of ideas."

Ethnic diversity has long been a part of Emmanuel's makeup. A Chinese congregation was part of the Emmanuel family in the 1930's. Temple Baptist, which merged with EBC in 1967, came with a strong black membership.

Franklin emphasizes, however, that Emmanuel's diversity is more than skin deep. "Our differences are obvious when you walk in the door, but we're able to reach across all those boundaries because the things that connect us are a lot more substantial than the superficial differences that people see between us. Actually, I think all these people are just like me. They care.



This church has always had a core of people who really cared for each other, like an extended family. The people who come and stay are people who are looking for that kind of atmosphere."

Emmanuel's inclusiveness shows itself also in an active lay leadership. "You can have a voice and make a difference," says Franklin. "There's a real willingness to accommodate everyone's convictions, and no qualifications other than interest."

From Focus projects to American Baptist missions, Emmanuel's members are involved both locally and globally. The strongest emphasis, however, is ministry within the city of Albany itself.

Jean Palm remembers the prac-

Address: 275 State St.

Telephone: 465-5161

Founding date: 1834

Clergy: Roy A. Donkin, Pastor

Director of Music: Ralph G. Tooley

Minister of Christian Education: Cheryl Donkin

Host to: Metropolitan Community Church, Jackie's Aerobics, Big Brothers/Big Sisters

Home to: N.Y. Statewide Senior Action Network, Community Services Society of N.Y., Brookside Center for the Aging, Statewide Emergency Network for Social and Economic Security



Roy Donkin

manifests itself in programs. It manifests itself more informally, like a real family.

Emmanuel embodies both aspects of its slogan — A Caring Church in the Heart of the City. Ask the members what they think of when they think of Emmanuel, and you're likely to get answers like these: caring, inclusiveness, diversity.

"Emmanuel Baptist Church is probably more reflective of the city as a whole than any other church I

No Exclusion

Each Sunday afternoon the Metropolitan Christian Church, a congregation of gays and lesbians, meets at Emmanuel. The M.C.C., a national organization founded in 1968, opens its doors to all without exclusion. Several of the Albany worshippers are heterosexual.

The present membership of eleven comes from ten different traditional church backgrounds. "We are ecumenical in style and faith," explains the present leader. "In other churches we heard, 'God loves you, but Here we say, 'God loves you, period.'"



After being the pastor at Emmanuel for over three years, I still remember vividly what drew me to the church in the first place.

The pulpit committee that contacted me represented a wonderful mix of ages, backgrounds, races and theological understandings. Rather than transcend their differences, they used them to an advantage. Here was a church obviously committed to diversity. That openness extended to ministry. Partnership with other churches through Focus was recognized as a vital part of Emmanuel's identity.

The leaders in the church impressed me as

competent and committed, but it was a congregation where leadership could be shared. Even children and youth were viewed as valued members of the community.

This congregation saw faith as an on-going journey. Opportunities for growth along that path were accepted as crucial. Sunday School was not only for children but included elective classes for adults to wrestle with life's hard questions.

All this is still true. Emmanuel still excites me as we face the challenges of ministry together here in Albany.

Roy Donkin

tical help Emmanuel offered when she and her husband Robb ran a foster home for six children. Jean, who has since served as moderator of the church (the central lay role), says she has always been impressed by the responsibility members assume, working out an understanding of what a relationship with God demands. "That's an important tension that continues."

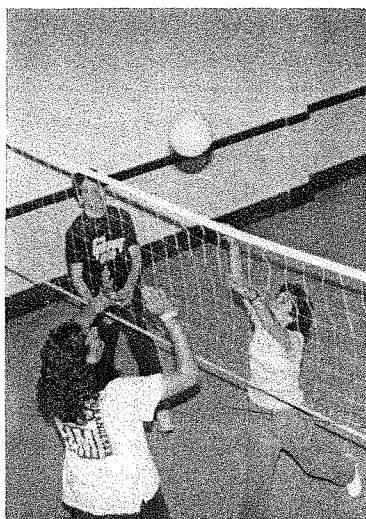
This vital level of lay involvement is reflective of the American Baptist tradition in church polity, which emphasizes the autonomy of the local congregation in all matters, from determining budgets to calling pastors to choosing the ministries and programs that characterize the church's community involvement. The commit-

ment to a democratic system of "one member, one vote," with no one, including pastors, holding more of a voice than anyone else, is most evident in lengthy and lively monthly diaconate meetings, where commission members regularly spend a few hours hashing out the logistics of everything from building maintenance to visitation.

Kathy Flint attended Emmanuel as a child. After 12 years away, she returned as a single parent with a daughter and concern about being welcome. "I came back to Emmanuel uncertain, embarrassed and ashamed. Nobody gave me crazy looks. They just accepted me and fussed over Rebekah."

"Emmanuel has been an important part of our lives," says Rolando Santiago, who came to Albany with his wife Raquel to pursue a doctorate in psychology at SUNY in 1984. Their children, Jared and Karla, were born here. "When we decided to start a family, people showered us with support. I don't know what we would have done without the church. Emmanuel has been our center for investing ourselves in the community. We expect that Emmanuel will continue to be there, a constant base as other things change."

Ron MacLean has been a member of Emmanuel for two years and has taught in the Christian Education program.



Playing volleyball at Emmanuel.

Lucy Wong's Journey

For as long as Lucy Wong can remember, Emmanuel Baptist Church has been part of her life. The fifth of six children in a poor Chinese family living in the "red light district" of Albany's South End, she recalls Easter and Christmas baskets and gifts of clothing from Emmanuel. Twice on Sundays she and her brothers and sisters walked the distance up the hill to the Chinese Sunday School and services at the church on State Street.

A resident now of Arbor Hill, Lucy

still identifies with the margins of society. In 1975, when the house next to hers burned down, she became involved in neighborhood rehab, and has since worked at a number of community services. Until recently she ran the food pantry and the thrift shop at St. Joseph's Housing Project. At Emmanuel she sings in the choir, attends adult classes, and is now chair of the Caring and Fellowship Board. "I have a lot of inner strength," she says. "I like to help people understand their rights."



Lucy Wong



WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN

Responding to Challenge

By Shirley Otty

"The willingness to try new solutions is one of the on-going challenges of Christianity," said Betty Sutherland, our Associate Pastor, in a recent Sunday sermon.

Address: 85 Chestnut Street

Telephone: 436-8544

Clergy: S. Albert Newman, Senior Minister
Betty G. Sutherland, Associate

Directors of Music: Alfred V. Fedak and Susan Hermance Fedak

Christian Education Coordinator:
Patricia A. Trudeau

History: Formed in 1919, a union of three Presbyterian churches, one dating to 1813

Membership: 444

Average Attendance: 150

Host to: Center Square Neighborhood Association, Compassionate Friends, Hunger Action Network, Albany Committee for Education, Community Loan Fund

Home to: Focus Breakfast Program



Albert
Newman



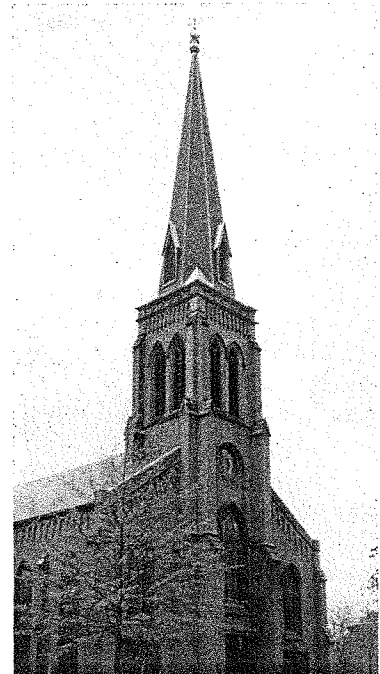
Betty
Sutherland

From our present perspective, pew rents, ushers in frock coats, all-male boards of governance and a static communion service seem incongruous. Yet well into the 1940's these were comfortable and accepted customs for a thriving Westminster congregation.

One of our members, Ada Linklater, recalls those times and the changes which occurred in following years. Today the church building may look very much the

same, but its doors have opened wider to the outside community and its style of worship is warmer and more relaxed. Women now figure importantly in all capacities at Westminster. Peg Edgerton, who has been part of the church for fifty years, finds "more joy" in our less formal communion service. Joan Shinnerer, who recently joined the church, feels our worship is "Christ-centered" and finds a spirituality she seeks. Albert Newman, our Senior Pastor, describes our image in the community as a place of worship which has provided continuity over the years.

Music plays an important part in what Westminster offers, and in what it asks of the congregation. Alfred Fedak, our organist and



Music Director, believes strongly that Christianity is a singing faith, and is eager to help heighten congregational understanding of what

Elton Trueblood has observed the importance of the "conjunction" in theology, expressing the linkages which give meaning and contour to Christian faith: divine and human, heaven and earth, body and soul, faith and knowledge, word and sacrament, darkness and light. "Conjunctive theology" is also descriptive of some of the accents of faith at Westminster: worship and service, evangelism and social action, faith and art, inward journey and outward journey, reality and dreams, community of friends and Body of Christ. "Conjunctions" express connections: young and old, black and white, choir and congregation, organ and voice, pastors and people, new and "seasoned" disciples, single and married.

"Conjunctions" also have a role in saying who we are at Westminster: a place to cry and a place to laugh, a place to work and a place to play, a place to listen and a place to speak, a place to solve problems and a place to relax when problems are solved, a place to bring our lostness and a place where we are found, a place of silence and a place of prayer. These are some of the "conjunctions" that describe our aspirations as a congregation.

S. Albert Newman



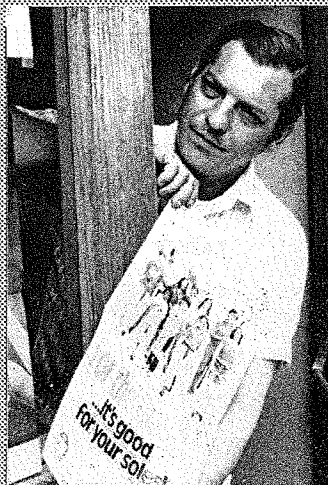
How Roland Came to Westminster

Roland Bennett started work at Westminster on Friday the 13th, in February of 1981. It happened like this:

Two of Roland's sons spent several hours a week in an after-school program with Andy Russ, the new Street Minister. One day Andy said, "Clean up well, because we don't have a sexton right now."

"Oh," said five-year-old P.J. Bennett. "My father can be your sexton."

In seconds P.J. was flying home across an empty lot to the family apartment on Lancaster Street. Roland, unemployed for a long time, had just gotten out of an alcohol treatment center and had been dry for a whole month for the first time in 27 years. In no time he was back at the church, being interviewed by Carl Cooper, then the Senior Minister. "I



was terribly nervous," says Roland. "And I couldn't believe I was being treated with respect, like an ordinary human being."

He was hired, joined the church and became a deacon. "I was the guy who used to throw beer bottles at the church," he recalls. In a few years, the Bennetts owned their own home on Morris Street and added four nieces and nephews to their family. Roland's Morris Street garden, patterned after the Focus garden, and his free Labor Day picnics have made the news media on several occasions.

Now physically unable to work, Roland is nevertheless a presence in the church several days a week, while his wife Glenda takes over as sexton. "Of course, I taught her everything she knows," Roland will tell you.

we sing.

The challenge to change takes many forms and how we reach out to people in need is significant. In recent years our local mission budget also has expanded to include new demands: the Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless, Albany Area Housing Opportunities, the Domestic Violence Shelter, the Aids Boarding House and Habitat for Humanity. Focus projects supplement this ministry significantly.

One of Westminster's on-going challenges is the complex question of hospitality — how to maintain and preserve our beautiful old facilities without pulling in the welcome sign. The appropriation of funds that the stewardship of our building requires is a continuing matter of tension in the budget process, along with the need to update facilities. We allocated a sizable bequest to a new, more efficient kitchen. Recently, construction was completed on an elevator for those who find the present access to the upper floors difficult or impossible.

And then there is the stewardship of human lives — particularly our children and youth — another challenge that never goes away. Patricia Trudeau, our Christian Education Coordinator, works diligently to find creative ways to keep the children an active part of church, and church an active part of their lives. Susan Fedak, our Choir Director, has formed a Junior Choir which rehearses after church, exposing the children to worship, education and music in one morning each week.

Better communication is the key to finding any solution, says Susan Filipp, chair of the Worship Committee. She would like to see our monthly newsletter expanded with articles to build bridges between the congregation at large and the decision-making boards.

A long-range planning committee, chaired by Anne Older, is studying ways to utilize the money, talents and energy at our disposal. This group hopes

to clarify the distinctive roles of staff members and committees and provide guidelines for all facets of church activity.

"Once planning has been completed we hope more attention can be given to the actual delivery of ministry," adds Albert Newman. "There is much in the New Testament about Jesus ministering to people, but very little about Jesus sitting in committee meetings."

So, the challenge persists and the response continues. It isn't easy, but it is exciting and satisfying.

Shirley Otty has been a member of Westminster for 45 years. She has served as a deacon, and now chairs the Kitchen Committee.



A baby shower for the Ivaniskis, a Ukrainian family of ten members sponsored by Westminster.



FOCUS PROJECTS TODAY

After 25 years, Focus is still not a major institution with a large staff and budget. That decision is deliberate, reflecting a determination to concentrate on filling needs, rather than on formal structure. Projects fall into two categories: those supervised by the Community Minister under policies set by the Focus Executive Council, and independent organizations affiliated with Focus in a variety of ways. Funding differs from project to project.

All have a common core — the network of volunteer support drawn from the five Focus congregations.

Focus Administered Projects

Breakfast Program: A free hot meal served at Westminster to the homeless and other community people, November through April from 7 to 9 a.m.

Community Garden: From its start as supervised childrens' project, garden plots are now open to community families on a first-come basis.

Stars and Bells: A seasonal program providing Christmas gifts to needy families by in-kind donations from Focus members. Recipients are selected from Food Pantry clients and the AIDS Treatment Center at Albany Medical Center. The Doane Stuart School also donates gifts.

Internships: Selected seminary students spend summers in an urban ecumenical setting, under the care of the Community Minister.

My summer as a Focus seminary intern was varied in both duties and emotions.

My overall goal was to empower and enable people rather than to "help" them. And this proved to be a much more difficult task. It is infinitely easier to deliver a bag of groceries or to write out a clothing voucher for the Salvation Army than it is to build up an abused young woman's sense of self-worth, or to convince an alcoholic mother that she must seek treatment for herself before her son will be returned to her for custody. But it is precisely in these situations that real ministry needs to take place.



*Deborah Hannay
Doctoral candidate, Princeton Theological
Seminary
Focus Seminary Intern, summer 1989*

Breakfast at Westminster

We arrive at Westminster at 6:45 a.m. in a cold misting rain. Bill Carter lets us in at the Chestnut Street door. He and Chuck Gridley, both First Pres volunteers, have been here since before 6, to start the grill and the coffee. In fact, Bill is on his way out the door, headed for the day's work at the Empire Plaza.

Right behind us are the Knightons, Lou and Jack, a Westminster couple who have been helping with the breakfast since it started eight years ago. They begin work immediately, as familiar with the kitchen as if it were their own, pouring out maple syrup and milk into small white pitchers.

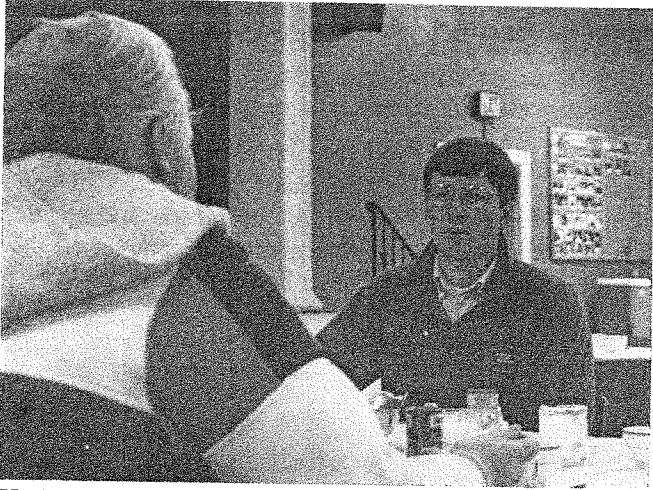


Alan Spencer of Trinity is the cook today. He's been here since about 6:20, over at the huge black stove, mixing the eggs for French toast and starting the sausages.

We can see Kevin in the brightly lighted assembly room beyond, talking with Tim Gordon, also from Westminster. It's Tim's first day. He's observing — "getting a feel," he says. A young businessman, Tim's manner is low-key yet friendly. He takes a seat in a small living room area, reading a newspaper. As the guests arrive just before 7:00, he looks up casually to nod and speak.

By Shirley Nelson

The guests are entering by the side door, off the alley between State and Chestnut. At least six of them have been waiting out there for the door to open. Most carry plastic sacks or athletic bags, stuffed with their belongings. Still wearing hats and jackets, they help themselves at the coffee pots plugged in at the edge of the stage. Some of them have been up all night. Others come from shelters and have showered and shaved. "There's my friend Jack!" cries a man in a blue hunting cap. "You can shake my hand," he says, holding it out to Jack Knighton. "I washed it last week."



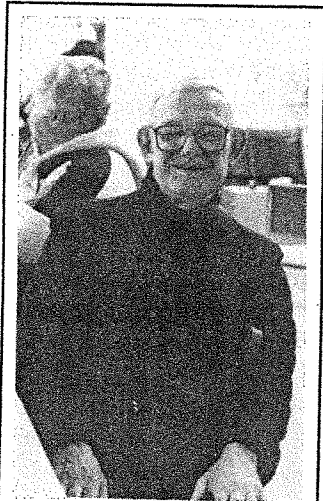
Kevin Wansor talks with a breakfast guest.

The kitchen is bustling now. A young woman, Susan Poisson-Dollar, has arrived to help. She and Lou walk quickly back and forth from the kitchen to the tables, making last minute adjustments. The sausages sizzle and the fan over the stove hums, not quite removing the sweet fumes of grilling toast. "Do you have enough bread?" Kevin asks the cook. Kevin moves from one job to another, greeting guests and helpers, always soft-spoken. The atmosphere is relaxed.

Now the carts roll out of the kitchen with the first servings of hot food, two French toast and two sausages each. No seconds, as a rule. But the tables are loaded with food. Donuts and sweetbreads, coffee and juice are unrestricted. Bowls of apples, loaves of bread and jars of peanut butter and jelly line the center of each table. People are free to make themselves lunches to take away.

Yet another volunteer arrives, Beth Meer, a young woman who works for the legislature. She eats breakfast, chatting with Linda, a frequent breakfast guest who talks willingly about herself. She has been coming to the breakfast for about three years. At first she came "solo flight," she explains. "I had a lot of fears. But I felt protected here."

Linda's home is an apartment, subsidized, since she is "disabled," as she explains readily. The single mother



Ralph Labrum, 75, remembers the days when volunteers were not as plentiful. Now slowed by illness, he still arrives before 7 a.m. every breakfast day. Ralph knows all of the regulars, and has a word for everyone. A member of Emmanuel Baptist, he says: "I enjoy the Lord and put Him first in everything I do."

of two daughters, she gets help from a mental health group.

By 8:15 a.m. 40 people have been fed and more are arriving. Servers pick up used dishes, wipe the plaid plastic cloth and reset new places. There's a hubbub of conversation now, here and there laughter. But the noisiest people are the volunteers, joking in the kitchen over the sound of the big dishwasher.

A small grey-haired man carries his own dirty dishes to the kitchen, then returns to a soft chair in the living room section and shuts his eyes. He seems undisturbed when two young men sit down at the piano and begin to play a duet. It's raucous but not bad. Kevin is a little uneasy. Not all guests appreciate the piano at this hour and at times they've gotten burly about it. He stands quietly nearby until the men stop.

Perhaps the youngest person present, hardly more than a boy, asks for a bandaid. He has gotten a blister on his foot from walking. We search the first-aid kit and give him three, a couple for later. His name is Ron and he's from Cobleskill, he tells us. "You're younger than most people here," we say. "Younger than most but older than some," he answers. He's been out of work for a long time, staying with friends, but he "hates to be a burden." Didn't know about the mission and the shelters, or the breakfast either, until just recently. "I couldn't believe it was free," he says.

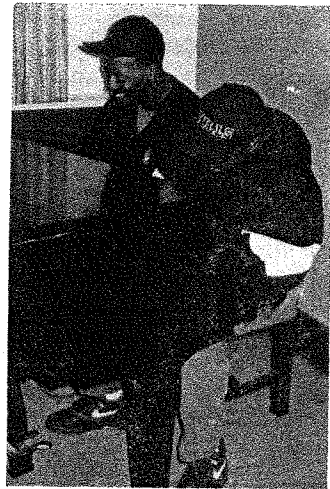
The last person to arrive this morning is John. He almost sneaks in, his head lowered close to his chest, his shoulders permanently rounded. Perhaps he is fifty. It's hard to tell. He eats quickly, then heads for the piano. He plays a lush version of "The Tennessee Waltz," but surreptitiously, bent over the keys so low his head seems to touch them. When we speak to him he looks up. His eyes, clear blue in a weathered face, make instant contact. He answers questions shyly. His mother was a music teacher, he explains. She made him take lessons early. When she wasn't listening he stopped playing Brahms and improvised, jazz or whatever. "I didn't have to go outdoors and play football, anyway," he adds. "I liked that."

But it's 9:30 now and time for everyone to go. The three tables have been reset and the lights go out in the kitchen. A few minutes later, outside the church on Chestnut Street, we see John again, his head curled down, adjusting a piece of plastic over a shopping cart heaped with his possessions. The misty rain has changed to a steady downpour.

"Goodbye, John," we call.

"Have a good day," he answers. "It's going to clear up."

Then he's off, pushing his cart toward the Plaza, or wherever it is he goes in the city when it rains, this man without a home.





Focus Affiliated Projects

Food Pantry: At Trinity Methodist on Monday, Thursday and Friday mornings of the last two weeks of each month. The pantry board — members of Focus, United Fourth Presbyterian, Temple Beth Emeth, First Unitarian and St. Andrews Episcopal — run the pantry in cooperation with Kevin Wansor.



"Different Shoes" performing at the Eighth Step.

CROP Walk: One of three county-wide projects held each spring, raising money to fight hunger locally and around the world. Among the 2,500 participants, Focus "walkers" raised \$10,000 in 1991.

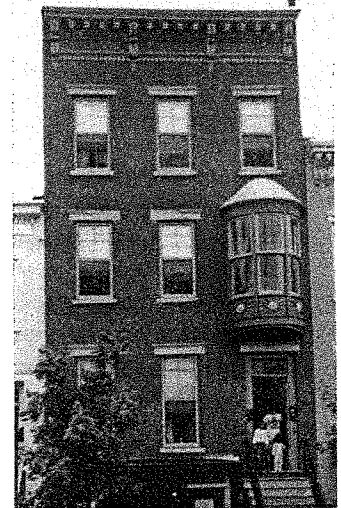


Eighth Step Coffee House: Located in the basement of First Pres, the Eighth Step is the oldest, continuously running coffee house in the country. Focus members continue to serve on its

Albany Area Housing Opportunities: AAHO, an independent, not-for-profit organization, renovates, builds and maintains houses in downtown Albany for low and middle income families. The Community Minister serves on the all-volunteer board, along with other Focus members.

One of Focus's proudest achievements has been the enabling of Albany Area Housing Opportunities. The building at 142 Lancaster was a moment of deep engagement between Focus and the neighborhood, and the energy generated in that synapse still burns bright in Center Square more than a decade later.

*Rick Spalding
Assistant, Westminster,
1981-1983
Associate, 1984-1985
Officer of AAHO 1982-1985*



One of the houses on Hudson Ave. renovated by AAHO.

One Morning at the Food Pantry

At 10:30 sharp the heavy panelled double doors open and the thirty people crowd through Trinity's Lark Street entrance. Half are men, young and old. Half are women, with pre-school children and babies in strollers. The space they enter, the receiving room of the Focus Food Pantry, is elegant in a "churchy" way, with its flagstone floor and leaded glass in the doors.

People seat themselves tentatively on the high backed wooden pews lining the walls of the receiving room. The room fills with chatter. For some this is a social occasion. Others look uneasy. Several of the younger men stare at the floor, as if embarrassed to be here.

Volunteers have been at work for over an hour. The "drivers," along with Kevin, picked up supplies at the Regional Food Bank at 9:15 a.m., and have lugged a half-dozen boxes into the Trinity store room, 50 loaves of bread and 50 boxes of coffee cake and cookies from Freihofer's Bakery. The store room shelves

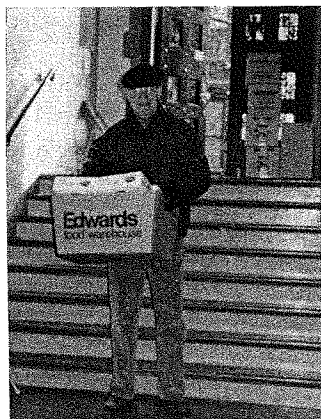
are packed with canned vegetables, applesauce, pork and beans, tuna, cereal, peanut butter, powdered milk, baby food and formula. Today there are extras from somewhere, as well — a huge yellow squash and containers of yogurt.

One of 12 distribution centers for the Food Pantries of the Capital District, the Focus Pantry calls on 80 volunteers throughout the year. Nine are here today, in a variety of roles, but there's never a way to predict how many helpers will be needed on a given morning.

One by one as the clients come to the desk, Doris Fry of First Pres

By Shirley Nelson

pulls out their permanent record cards, or makes out new ones for first time visitors. Name and address, number in family, number of children, sources of income — it's a bit of bureaucracy necessary for equity of distribution. A few rules prevail. No food to anyone who has obviously been drinking. And proof of



Norman Andrews of Westminster unloads groceries.



address is required. A dozen food pantries operate in the city, each covering a different territory. Focus serves a square mile, roughly within Quail, Swan, Sherman and New Scotland. It's not uncommon for clients to use more than one name and address in order to get supplies at more than one pantry.

Doris gives each person a number (a courtesy, to protect identity), and as these are called clients go to tables set up behind screens, where the interviewers, one of them clergy (Gailey McIntyre today), fill out another brief form based on new data. This gives clients a few minutes to talk in privacy.



Sidney Kent and John Seiloff check the bread supply.



Rita Abrams of Temple Beth Emeth and Janet Schmitt of Bethlehem Community Church work as baggers.

Some do so readily, filling in the spaces on the forms with the unwritten dramas of their job-hunts, their children's illnesses, their battles with landlords and agencies. One man is just out of prison, another has injured his back and has lost his job. A young blond man with a vacant look in his eyes complains for ten minutes about corruption in government. A black woman in her mid-twenties repeats emphatically that she comes only when she is "really out of food." A single mother with three children, she works part-time as a nurse's aide while her father baby-sits. Two other children are with her, zipped up tight in their jackets, small toys in their hands.

Interviewers jot notes on the forms. "Extrababy food," they write, or "Cookies, if possible," or "No milk, allergic." One makes a special memo for Kevin: "Man with no heat in his apartment. Three children."

The forms are sent to the packers, who fill bags for each family unit. These are pushed out to the receiving room in a supermarket cart. Numbers are called again and clients pick up their provisions. Most leave quickly. A few are disgruntled. "Where's my cheese?" demands a heavy-faced man, peering into his bag.

Now there's a flurry of some kind at the desk. Kevin is called over for help. A gentleman is upset because he has been asked for proof of address. He has been living at the City Mission and has just moved to Lancaster Street, he says. But he can't remember the number of the house, and has brought no record. Kevin offers to call the Mission and the man gets his

groceries. A few minutes later that appears to be a mistake. Apparently panhandlers on the corner have sent him in for supplies they can resell at local stores.

By 11:30 the baked goods are completely gone. It's well past noon by the time everyone has been served and the receiving room is empty. The women in the storeroom straighten the shelves. The interviewers put on their coats and prepare to leave, their minds full of the loose ends of people's lives. Even the willing talkers have not told their real stories. Little has been said about drugs or alcohol, or mismanaged money, or family violence.

But the morning is not really over. Days later, following up on the "man with no heat in his apartment," Kevin uncovers a tangle of family circumstances beyond any help Focus can give. The bill for heat and rent is more than Focus discretionary funds can pay, and the man refuses to pursue welfare and other available services. If he applies for those, he must acknowledge his sources of income — support from the mothers (at least two) of his children. Both women are apparently on welfare. The interview ends with disappointment and anger. "Why did you ask so many questions," asks the father, "if you can't give me any help?"

The reality of the Food Pantry is both its essentiality and its limitations. What it offers most surely is temporary sustenance and the assurance that somebody cares. The rest is uncertain. That's the nature of community ministry.

It was David Giles' idea when he was pastor at Trinity. People were coming to him and asking for food, so some of us began to assist him by collecting food from Trinity members and storing it in the church. At first we just served people referred to us by Rev. Giles.

*Margaret Childers
First Coordinator,
Focus Food Pantry*

Focus 1992 Budget

<u>Program</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Focus Funds</u>	<u>Other Sources (estimated)</u>
Food Pantry	\$21,000		\$21,000
Breakfast Program	3,500		3,500
Stars and Bells	7,500		7,500
Summer Intern for '92	2,500		2,500
Life & Worship	2,500	\$2,500	
Program/Direct Assistance	1,269	1,269	
Community Minister (salary & expenses)			
	<u>38,186</u>	<u>38,186</u>	
Totals:	\$76,455	\$41,955	\$34,500

Focus is funded in part by the five Focus churches, which assess themselves proportionately based on "living giving." Other funding (which can only be estimated here) comes from a variety of donations, with some governmental assistance for the food pantry and the breakfast program.



Trailing the Community Minister:

My plan was to spend one full day with Kevin Wansor, making an hour-by-hour tally of his activities. This turned out to be logistically impossible, since he kept slipping away to answer the telephone, confer with clients, or attend meetings at which journalists with clipboards were not particularly welcome. So I followed on his heels as closely as I could on three separate days. Part of that time was spent at the Food Pantry and the Breakfast Program. But one cool Tuesday afternoon last fall we hit the streets while I drilled him with questions about his weekly schedule.

We met at noon at Kevin's office on the second floor of Emmanuel. He picked up his black appointment book (as fat as a Bible), and we began our walk — west on Central to Lexington, then north to Clinton. Other than Center Square, this is one of Kevin's customary routes on his excursions "out." Others are North Pearl Street and the Empire State Plaza.

Excursions "out," which he takes on an average of two or three times a week, are for two purposes. The first is to keep himself visible and available to the people of this loose-knit parish of the streets — a "presence." The second is to seek out persons for whom he is advocating, and who have no stable address where they can be reached.

On Clinton we stopped at the Albany United Methodist Society and talked with them about the startling increase in food pantry clients this year. Focus is vitally linked to the A.U.M.S., as it is to the Salvation Army and the Interfaith Partnership for the Homeless.

Westward on Clinton towards Robin the streets were

quiet, empty for the most part of the clusters of men Kevin would ordinarily stop to greet. His face is familiar. Some call him "Father Kevin," maybe tongue-in-cheek. Many know from experience what he can and can't do for them.

He can't, and won't, give them cash on the street, even small change. It's hard to say no, he admits, but instead he offers several alternatives. He might invite people to visit him at Emmanuel to determine their real needs, or he might give them meal vouchers (cashable at Sam's Home Cooking on Lark Street), or the "Albany Street Survival Guide," which lists shelters, pantries, medical services, support groups, hot-lines, and the ten or more sites where meals are available throughout the week.

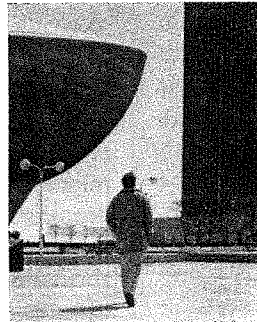
"And where do the homeless spend nights?" I asked, as we walked toward Central. The weather today was cloudy and brisk, and my mind shot ahead to winter and the possibility of nights in the park.

"Legitimate overnight space is available to anyone willing to pursue it," Kevin answered. "But it's not the easiest system in the world."

The City Mission takes men directly without referral, but admission to all other shelters (a total of ten) is coordinated by Traveler's Aid on Green Street. None of the shelters take guests who are violent or uncooperative.

Once on Central again we headed east, then over to State and Washington Park. The "clusters" were there all right, but my presence was too inhibiting for attempted encounters.

"What if one of those men were to come to see you at



By Shirley Nelson

Rethinking Kevin's Job

By Nancy Horan

In September the Focus Executive Council asked the Community Ministry Committee "... to review the Community Minister's job description and facilitate a shift away from administrative details. This would encourage volunteer participation, communication and new project development."

At its October meeting, the committee, which is made up of two representatives from each congregation, began this task. The job description had not been changed since Kevin interviewed for the position in the spring of 1987. Our rewording attempted to reflect the current reality of the program, and to express the shift away from administrative details. Perhaps the single most important change has been the addition of the

following statement: "The Community Minister encourages lay participation in creating and leading the Focus projects ... and facilitates that participation with information and training." In the previous description, there had been no mention of volunteer involvement.

Kevin cannot by himself be the Community Ministry program. Individual committee members are already taking on a more active role, and we are diligently encouraging Kevin to delegate administrative details. As the process has made a difference in the committee, we hope this spirit will move beyond to the wider Focus community.

Nancy Horan chairs the Community Ministry Committee.



What does he do all day?

Emmanuel?" I asked. "How would it work?"

He meets people in the church lounge, Kevin explained, where he listens to their requests. Now and then someone wants help in entering a detox system or needs advocacy with a social service. But most want money. Usually he finds it best to make phone calls immediately in their presence to check out their stories. Even if those prove true he seldom offers a cash hand-out. He goes to the bus station to buy tickets for people who need them, and writes checks directly to landlords or other providers. Often people ask for food or diapers for children, and that is what he gives them, not money for the purpose.

At the State Street door of First Pres we began a different kind of excursion — "in," where mail and messages await. People are often referred to Kevin through the churches. Emergencies are called in from each church to Emmanuel. Several times in our discussion he praised the secretaries for their help. As a rule, they are the ones who open the doors to the people of the street parish, who do preliminary interviews and make judgments about who should be called if the pastors are not present.

On the way back to Emmanuel, after stopping at Sam's to pick up 23 meal vouchers (\$66 worth of food charged to Focus), I asked for a broader picture of Kevin's schedule. Given what amounts to more than a fifty hour week, he broke it down for me like this:

- 10 percent in outreach to street people or the poor — "going where they are."
- 10 percent responding to those who come to the churches for help and providing whatever advocacy they need.
- 25 percent at the Food Pantry, or connected responsibilities.
- 25 percent at the Breakfast Program, or connected responsibilities (winters; summers are spent in the garden).
- 10-12 percent at Albany Medical Center where he is a chaplain in the Pastoral Care Department, with AIDS patients and the poor as his special responsibility.
- 5 percent Presbytery/ecumenical work.
- 10-15 percent at committee meetings, usually one a day.

Some of these are for planning Focus activities, others are non-profit groups.

Whatever time is left is spent preparing for speaking engagements (often two a month) or counseling — or just "connecting."

Probably Kevin's days are no more full and unpredictable than those of any Focus pastor. In fact, Focus pastors all respond to those who knock at the church doors. All participate in Kevin's work and he and they are extensions of each other. But Kevin is the point of referral, the one who tracks down the elusive, spends hours at social services, finds housing and clothing. In that respect he could be called an "enabler."

Back at Emmanuel at 3:30 we found four telephone messages waiting, including an elderly woman in tears because her electricity was about to be shut off. I left him to tend to this, along with four other scheduled calls, 40 letters to sign for a

An Interview with Kevin

Q: Where do you personally feel the most pressure in terms of time and energy?

A: I guess I feel pulled in too many directions at once. I worry that the impact of Focus is too fragmented. Yet there's so much to do.

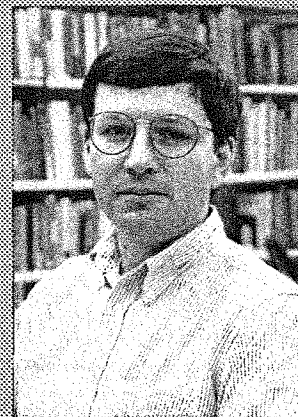
Q: In view of that it must be hard to know when you are doing enough.

A: I don't. There's always more. But we can only show people alternatives and try to throw light on their choices. Sometimes that means walking someone through the process of getting in touch with social services, and other times it means acting as a spiritual counselor.

Q: But the difference between those two things seems terribly important. Isn't it what makes Focus different from social agencies?

A: Yes, and the point is that we are free to deal with the difference. We're able to move between the various aspects of the human community and fill the gaps between physical and spiritual needs — which is what government agencies are not in a position to do. In other words, we can minister to the whole person, to the extent that individuals are able to receive that.

Kevin Wansor received a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and was ordained by the Presbytery of Albany in 1987. He spent a year in residence in clinical pastoral education, and prior to accepting the role as Focus Community Minister, worked as a chaplain at Trenton State Psychiatric Hospital.



Kevin Wansor

special mailing, and an evening meeting to prepare.

Throughout this entire interview one question hung in the background: How necessary is the Community Minister to the work of Focus? What does he do that the rest of us can't do without him? Walking home I thought of the two words "presence" and "enabler." What a hundred volunteers could not provide is a consistent presence on the streets, or a single center of enabling.

On the other hand, the reverse is unquestionably clear — the work of the Community Minister cannot be done without cooperation of clergy and volunteers. It may be the "best job in the world," as Kevin often says, but there's no possible way to do it alone.



RE-FOCUSING FOCUS

Bob Lamar says that every five years or so a new group of people comes along and by their energy and enthusiasm sets Focus on a new course. He cites the Kairos Center for Care and Counseling and the Community Gardens as examples. This "capacity for regeneration" is the key to the longevity and strength of this unique association of downtown Albany congregations, the long-time pastor of First Presbyterian believes.

Fred Shilling says that this time Focus can't wait. The 25th year, 1992, is "a life or death year," says the consultant to the recent Focus review process. While Focus is quite capable of continuing its current path for the foreseeable future, Shilling feels that without changes it will eventually succumb to a lack of vision, leadership and volunteer initiative, and a failure to effectively address conflict.

Is Fred Shilling correct in his estimate? His list of "negative scenarios" was distributed as part of the report of the Focus Review and Planning Task Force last June. But the task force, in its survey of the five churches, found overwhelming support for Focus and a great deal of identification with the missions of Focus as important to both the individuals and their churches.

Following the survey, the Focus Executive Council took some initial steps. The most visible of these were to split the Worship and Community Life Committee into two separate committees. The new Worship Committee will supervise all joint worship, with particular evaluation of summer services. The Community Life Committee has already sponsored two retreats and is planning the 25th anniversary celebration in June. There is also a new yearly planning process, with a specific timetable that began this spring.

Left unaddressed by the initial review were such major issues as funding and the geographic boundaries of Focus — and deliberately so, according to Shilling. The task force formed by the Focus Executive Council had a charter to

review and plan only, and avoided pressures to "solve" specific problems, Shilling says. In his view, those issues must be addressed by the council, which is the governing body of Focus and whose members are directly responsible to their individual congregations.

The task force's survey brought forth a long list of ideas for renewal and change, as well as concerns that reflect the issues raised by Shilling. Those same concerns surfaced again and again in various contexts in a dozen different interviews with Focus leaders and volunteers.

What follows is a conversation of sorts, a dialogue woven together out of those interviews. It does not represent an official position, but attempts to report on themes raised during and after the review process.

Leadership

In our interviews we found that leadership and resources are very closely connected. Many people see the hiring of a paid staff person in 1979 as a watershed in the life of Focus, both in terms of the increased financial commitment and in

How the Review Process Began

In the spring of 1990, Kevin Wansor asked the Focus Executive Council to set up a system of review, a vehicle for assessing the general operation of Focus on a regular basis, including his own role as Focus Community Minister.

Kevin and others deeply involved in the operations of Focus had been troubled in recent years by a growing set of questions. What is the most effective role of the Community Minister? What is the best balance between clergy leadership and volunteer participation? How can communication between the five churches be improved? Should

other churches be invited to join Focus? How can it best work with city agencies? Does Focus need new projects? How should they be financed? In fact, can the five churches continue to underwrite the present Focus programs? Can Focus survive financially at all in the future years?

By January of 1991 the Executive Council had formed a Review and Planning Task Force made up of 13 church members and clergy, with Fred Shilling, Director of Pastoral Care at Albany Medical Center, under contract as consultant for the process.



the shift from an all-volunteer organization to one with a professional infrastructure. Despite all efforts to keep the position of Focus Community Minister distinct from Focus itself, the tendency to rely on the Focus minister to "get things done" is strong.

In his report, Shilling worries that Focus will develop "increased dependence on Kevin Wansor to the neglect of lay involvement." Wansor's job description has been rewritten to re-emphasize his distinct role as a "community minister" (see Page 24), but the inevitable demands of Focus as an organization remain.

Several members of the Focus clergy also expressed concern over the dampening effect of clergy involvement on volunteer initiative. "Clergy need to learn to not pick up the pieces all the time," suggests Gailey McIntyre, Associate Pastor at First Presbyterian. Yet Bob Lamar remembers the 1974 Focus review, when clergy were reinstituted in the Focus structure because the volunteer leadership felt the absence of "theological imagination."

The other side of that coin is the heavy demand on clergy time. Judy Mark, who has just completed a term as president of the Focus Council, is not sure how to measure clergy participation in Focus just now. How often, she asks, are representatives on the Focus Executive Council, either clergy or lay, expected to report to their congregations? How do Focus activities find their way onto the regular agenda of a given church?

The amount of time members of the clergy want — or feel they have permission — to give to Focus will continue to be a major issue, says Lamar. Betty Sutherland echoes that. Of the thirty or more clergy who have come and gone in the 25-year history of Focus, she is the most recent addition. Though she accepted a ministry in Albany in part because of Westminster's

I'm convinced that local congregations must learn to be mission-minded in order to survive. But their lethargy has led them to become museums instead. I see Focus differently. Focus is not an institution; it's a viable organism. Therefore it is able to do what local congregations cannot do alone in terms of both scope and use of resources.



Fred Schilling,
consultant to 1991 Focus
Review Process

involvement in Focus, she says she has discovered it necessary to "make time" for Focus activities.

We found a consensus that volunteers must take a stronger role, especially as planners and administrators. Kevin Wansor notes that while there are many willing hands — so many that high-visibility projects like the Food Pantry and the Breakfast Program have waiting lists for volunteers — there are too few people willing to take charge and manage projects.

Education

Throughout the history of Focus, persistent attempts have been made to help fill the leadership gap by training volunteers. The idea of a so-called "Lay Academy" (later called the Ecumenical Training and Study Center) was proposed for that purpose, but never materialized. Later, the annual Focus Lenten Institute flourished

for several years, dying out in the mid-80s as attendance and interest dwindled.

The Focus Institute, along with the Silver Bay annual retreats, were successful in drawing numbers from all the churches in person-to-person contact, what Shilling and others call "networking and bonding." Joint worship services seldom offer this opportunity for inter-personal contact.

"Right now I don't know if I see anything that holds all of Focus together," says Nancy Horan of First Presbyterian, a long-time volunteer and chair of the Community Ministry Committee.

Roy Donkin, pastor of Emmanuel, agrees that there is a deep need for continuing education, supplying a spiritual and theological basis for community service. "People at Emmanuel do all the right things," he says. "But they don't always know why."

In the view of Jim Miller, one of the founders of Focus and

What the Task Force Recommended

In June, 1991, the Review and Planning Task Force submitted six recommendations based in large part on a survey administered to the five churches in May. In summary, they are:

1. Increase Focus communication network for greater Focus visibility and involvement, with improved long-range planning both inside and outside the Focus community.

2. Develop an ongoing research and development group to identify specific needs within the churches and Focus operations.

3. Develop at least two events each year for linking people between the congregations and promoting fellowship.

4. Evaluate the present five-church membership in Focus while continuing to involve other churches and agencies in projects.

5. Promote new projects only if they are volunteer-led, with the Community Minister as guide and administrator.

6. Give special attention to other suggestions made by members in the church survey.



now Executive Presbyter for the Albany Presbytery, in order to recover theology we need to see it in terms of how we live: "How do we perceive our lives and actions to be influenced by what God wants us to do?"

Communication and Cooperation

The Review Task Force strongly recommended increased communication between the Focus Executive Council, the Community Minister and the churches. Newsletters and announcements are certainly necessary — we feel their absence very quickly — but communication, say many, must occur also on a much deeper level, touching on commitment and cooperation.

In the early years of Focus, there was much excitement about the idea of combining material resources and sharing personnel. But as time passed, the difficulty of this sort of inter-church cooperation became apparent. Such important issues as funding became a matter of formula, and were seldom openly discussed.

In his report, Shilling challenges members of the Focus Community to take communication and cooperation a step farther — to come in conflict with each other. (See point 5 in "Possible Downside").

"Constructive conflict" is a style and technique missing from most cultures, and especially from most church cultures, Shilling observes. Typically, churches either solve issues without conflict or avoid those issues. "When we start working together we think of being safe and cautious," he says.

"We in the church know how to fight in anger and darkness, but not how to fight and create," he adds. "Communication should lead to dialogue, not merely convey information, nor necessarily lead to consensus. If it does lead to dialogue, it is life-giving. If it cuts off dialogue, or doesn't invite and promote it, it is eventually death-giving."

Systematic dialogue may be the only way to deal with two questions put to the review Task Force by the Executive Council, and almost immediately returned to the lap of the Council by the Task Force. How do we define the geographical scope of Focus? And how do we solve the increasingly sensitive issue of funding?

I guess I expected more from the review process than it produced. For instance, our survey never went beyond the walls of the churches. What does the surrounding community need Focus to do or be? We seem to have "leveled off." How do we move into the leaps of faith that introduce new visions and adventure?

*Tod Wing, First Presbyterian
Member of Focus Review and
Planning Task Force*

A Sampling of Survey Suggestions

- Develop programs and assistance for our aging members.
- Offer a joint youth group and youth work projects.
- Introduce a long-term study of racism/classism.
- Utilize each church's strengths and programs as shared resources.
- Offer a study/dialogue on human sexuality.
- Encourage constructive critiques of all joint worship.
- Re-introduce the Focus Institute or other educational events on an annual basis.
- Expand the funding base.
- Offer counseling in employment, family crisis and single-parent support.
- Do a survey to identify short and long-term needs of the community.
- Develop a common spiritual/theological theme for a two-year exploration.

Scope

The geographic boundaries of Focus have generally been understood as Center Square and Hudson-Park, the neighborhoods that extend from Central to Park Avenue, and from Washington Park to the Empire State Plaza. But that is simply the area in which the churches are located, and not necessarily the area of greatest need. It is certainly not the area in which most of the members of the churches reside.

Add to this another concern: Albany, unlike many cities, has no effective coordination for the services of religious and non-profit organizations. Westminster's Albert Newman believes that Albany loses both funding and leadership because of this lack. When and if that issue is addressed in the city, he says, "I think Focus has to be part of that dialogue."

Our interviews turned up some ambivalence on this question of city-wide involvement. There is uncertainty about what role Focus should play in the city, and uncertainty about how to remain accountable in a larger, more politicized setting.

Those interviewed say that Focus has generally been more comfortable with programs designed to fill specific needs than with projects that attempt to bring broad social change or to correct injustice.

"Focus has a lot of power if we can really network," says Harold Rutherford, Pastor of Israel A.M.E. "It's good to give folks food, but what I think we have to do is empower folks."

Donkin recalls that Emmanuel made a conscious commitment to stay in Albany in the 1970s, and has tried to act on that commitment ever since. But, he says, it has sometimes been



difficult to identify the most effective way of helping. "There is a difference between charity and justice, and very few folks have trouble with charity," says Donkin. "If there is a cutting edge for Focus, it will be in learning to address what lies behind people's needs."

Shilling agrees. Albany, he observes, is a particularly "reactive" culture, politically inbred to the point where true change is very difficult. "We need to be aware that at times a church reflects the culture, and I think that Focus is the only proactive entity around."

But the Focus Executive Council has not in recent years had a structure for dealing with social issues or "peace and justice" concerns. While lamenting that lack, Westminster's Newman points out that individual Focus clergy and members have assumed outspoken roles on many city-wide issues.

Shilling suggests that Focus should remain its present manageable size, to serve not only as a source of strength for its own congregations but also as a model for others in the city.

Focus, in his view, should be very specific in its work and its area, "a particular constituency and a particular boundary." Its role in the larger community would be to become "a leader and a trainer."

Focus is a "mustard seed, not a way to feed the five thousand," says Shilling.

Funding

This is the subject that no one wants to talk about publicly, but which nearly everyone interviewed mentioned at some point. In Shilling's view, that reticence highlights the general tendency within Focus to shy away from conflict. Funding gets at "the underlying identity of Focus," and is an issue that will force itself to the forefront in the near future, Shilling believes.

The fact is that there are large disparities in resources among the five Focus churches. This has been true from the

start, and the 1988 addition of Israel African Methodist Episcopal to the Focus family has merely served to make the issue more visible.

The disparity has many ramifications: What one church can do quite painlessly may require real sacrifice on the part of another. Yet the sacrifice may bring greater meaning to the gift, and the ease of giving may lead to a disassociation. Moreover, leadership roles are always in danger of being allocated (perhaps unconsciously) on the basis of financial contribution.

Until now, the Focus Executive Council has not directly addressed the issue of funding allocations, and in recent years the budget has remained static and this year actually decreased.

Budgetary constraints have "certainly been an underlying issue in many of the things we have addressed," says Nancy Horan. The Focus Executive Council has now established a timetable for confronting the funding issue.

The review process which began in 1991 is hardly the first for Focus. In 1970 and 1974 intensive structural evaluations provoked many of the same questions, confusions and confirmations. While this may seem like the wheel re-inventing itself, perhaps it's another side of Bob Lamar's cyclical theory. Focus renews itself periodically by the introduction of new blood and new ideas, and it renews itself, too, by honest self-examination.

This story was written by Tom McPheeters based on interviews that he and Shirley Nelson conducted.

I was encouraged to see the level of concern from all the churches in continuing such important programs, and excited to see that there is such a diverse group of people working together in the community.

*Barbara MacLean, Emmanuel
Member of Focus Review and
Planning Task Force*

Possible Downside of Focus, 1992-1995

Observations of Fred Schilling, Consultant for Review and Development.

If Focus stays the way it is, it opens itself to the following negative scenarios.

1. Dependence on Kevin increases to the neglect of lay involvement.
2. Several clergy leave and no plans are set up to insure that the new clergy are committed to church cooperation and Focus goals.
3. No funding plan is developed.
4. Focus becomes too easily satisfied with the present projects.

5. Focus fails to identify and explore constructive, creative conflict through dialogue, thus permitting stereotypes to inform attitudes and decisions.

6. Churches increase their competitiveness.

7. Over-reliance on joint worship services results in the neglect of other networking and bonding.

8. An ongoing evaluation process as standard operation remains unestablished.

9. Churches become one-eyed: only involved on basis of self-interest. Focus needs both eyes wide-open: self-interest and community-interest.

10. Money become the base of power and decision-making.



RE-FUTURING FOCUS

Celebrations become empty rituals if they merely exonerate the past, and congratulations are hollow if untempered by challenge. As Focus people we have never been ones to sit around in self-adulation. We've also never wallowed in guilt — never even formed an ad hoc committee to contemplate our guilt. What we have done, with a healthy portion of both faith and hope, is to look steadily ahead.

In all that has been said about Focus in the past year, no one has so much as faintly suggested that the time has come for us to throw in the towel. Instead, ideas for the future abound. Here are some to contemplate on these last pages of our celebration.

Bob Lamar: I wish the Focus churches could return to the bonding of the earlier commitments — more sharing of decisions and more pooling of our resources.

Albert Newman: I would like to see the joint worship occasions be better mixes of worship and social commitment. How does joint worship empower us?

Fred Shilling: My vision for Focus is that it become a kind of laboratory for people to learn to participate in an urban setting with faith values. First we learn how, then we become 'equippers' for other people to do the same.

Kevin Wansor: The churches must risk letting go of some of their own territory and identity, to be part of the wider Church's wholeness.

Mickey Drown: I'm concerned about the fragmentation of helping agencies in the city. Does Focus stand in the way of a united front in meeting needs, addressing hunger and housing? There is no unifying thread.

Gailey McIntyre: I think women are neglected in our Focus emphasis. How many women attend the Breakfast Program? Is there a safe place for threatened women in Albany? A lunch place? Special advocacy?

Roy Donkin: Certainly we should provide more education in the theology of what we do. Our theology can give us the motivation for what I see as the cutting edge for Focus: How do we stand with the marginalized rather than administer to them?

Betty Sutherland: I hope we will begin to find ways to help people change the circumstances of their lives, rather than merely help them to survive where they are.

Harold Rutherford: There are other kinds of empowerment besides gifts of food. We need to follow through with people — adopt families we stick with over time, address the legal problems of the poor, provide nurturing environments for children. I want Focus to make a genuine impact on people's lives.

An Idea in Progress

Westminster Church is laying the groundwork for a "Community Self-Help Partnership." Inspired by the Self-Development of People (SDOP), a ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Westminster Committee for Mission has begun to explore ways to interact more directly and personally with those in need served by the Focus congregations.

Westminster sees the new partnership as an instrument through which Focus members can help channel the resources necessary to empower individuals who wish to gain greater control in their lives. The church plans first to conduct an assessment of the needs of the neighborhood and of the resources available, involving public agencies, private businesses, and the religious and community-based

organizations that act as human service providers. Areas of concern are expected to include:

- Generating employment opportunities.
- Opening doors to affordable housing.
- Improving access to health care and education.

We are all "enriched as powerless people transform themselves into communities that have taken hold of their futures," states a report of the SDOP. "... To empower people who are beginning to see themselves through new eyes is the reason to join in partnership with communities of need."

Those who would like to participate in such an enterprise are invited to call Westminster Church.

—David Dax



"... you shall be called the repairer of the breach..." Isaiah 58:12

Thoughts From the Executive Council

Tony Malone, President

I would like to discuss just two aspects of Focus — the mandate to act and the potential for positive change.

MANDATE: Focus has a Biblical imperative. The mandate is not one of a social institution; it's one of higher theological expectation.

It comes to us with considerable gifts. We have a history of experience, strong joint understanding of faith, a democratic precedence for social and religious action, and financial resources. These gifts are not free and must be used.

POTENTIAL: Our mandate also comes with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the source of our full potential. Practically speaking, what does that mean? Consider the following "dream scenarios":

- Focus plays a more effective role in changing the institutions of poverty.
- Focus multiplies its resources through wider ecumenical cooperation.
- Focus develops educational programs for its volunteers which enrich faith and corporate skills.
- Focus joint worship fosters a deeper community of love and commitment to service.

There is every reason to believe that these and other dreams of justice and community can be realized. The next quarter century will see much of that potential come to harvest as we take our mandate seriously.

Jim Kalas, Vice President

Over the years Focus programs have changed with the times and the concerns of the individuals involved, but fortunately the central concerns have remained the same: to share our common bonds in the faith and to provide a common ministry of presence, especially to poor people in downtown Albany.

The possibilities inherent within Focus still stir my imagination. I would hope that in addition to continuing its caregiving role, important as that is, Focus could reassert its prophetic voice, addressing the root causes of social, political and economic degradation, and giving expression to the redemptive work of God in our midst.



The Focus Executive Council meets monthly. Members are the five senior ministers, Tony Malone, Jim Kalas, Joyce Bascom, David Dax, Nancy Horan, Arthur Pitts, Elmer Green, Rudy Nelson, Audrey Graham, Irving Smith, Mary Jean Tedrow and Kevin Wansor.

From Judy Mark, Outgoing President

Throughout my years as chair of the Focus Council I was impressed with the inclusiveness of our "Covenant Mission Statement." I'd like to suggest that we look at it with new awareness during this anniversary year.

We Covenant . . . with God and one another to:

- *Engage in a search for faithful and effective forms of ministry.*
- *Provide a ministry of presence, support, and advocacy for the victims of society's injustice and neglect.*
- *Speak the truth in places of power on behalf of the powerless.*
- *Offer new possibilities of wholeness to the lonely and alienated.*
- *Equip ourselves for the service of Christ through joint educational and community building ventures.*
- *Celebrate in worship the meaning of our shared mission.*

We have worked hard to keep this covenant in the past. But in order to be effective, we must re-commit ourselves to be God's people in a broken and hurting world, searching for new and better ways to serve and heal our community and each other. Only then will we continue to be truly in Focus.

And One Last Word . . .

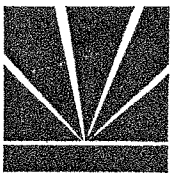
Why a "Community Ministry?" — To paraphrase Martin Luther King: If we profess to be concerned about the soul of humanity, then we must be concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar that soul. Any faith that professes otherwise is merely waiting for the day to be buried. Therefore, our love for Christ cannot be a weak, passive love, but love in action.

Rich Guralnick, Focus Community Minister, 1983-1987

... the mission of the Church is to be a pilgrim people, taking new form and new shapes according to the need of each community into which she needs to be scattered. In this connection, it is helpful to recall that the very symbol of the Church in the New Testament is not a house, but a tent, suggesting that the Church is characterized, not as a fixed community with all patterns set, but as a community on the move, ready for bold experiments and courageous advance in ministry.

From the original Focus mission statement, 1968.

First Focus joint worship, Emmanuel Baptist Church, November 24, 1968



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