

The Haven Mission Group – History & Vision

Sunday Worship, May 15, 2011

Presentation by Vince Sawyer

The Haven Mission Group: Alan Womack, Julia Crim & Vince Sawyer (Jeff Holdren – inactive)

Our name “The Haven” comes from Psalm 107. (Read verses 1-8 & 23-31)

From 1994 to 2003 I worked at The Gateway, a facility with which many of you are familiar. At The Gateway we noted many instances of men leaving our program, having maintained their sobriety for up to 2 years while there, only to relapse into active addiction once they were back in the community. We became convinced there was a need for a longer term supportive housing facility for men and women in recovery, a drug-and-alcohol-free place where they could continue to work their program along with others on the same journey.

In August of 1998 four of us (Mary Jane?) decided to begin a Mission Group focused on bringing into being the longer term facility we believed was so much needed. All of us were gainfully employed and committed fully to our own occupations, but we began to meet every week to hold up the vision we were carrying and to pray that in God’s time it would become a reality. In a few months our Mission Group will have been carrying that vision for 13 years.

I believe sometimes God gives us a special sign that we’re on the right track with the visions we carry. And that sign comes in the form of a human being who personifies the need to which we have decided to respond. In the case of our Mission Group, that sign came in the form of a struggling alcoholic named Wiley.

Having maintained his sobriety for one year while at The Gateway, Wiley decided to move back into the community and live on his own. He had a steady job as a

security guard at what is now Genworth. He had enough money to rent a second floor apartment from Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship at the corner of Fifth and Madison Streets. He could walk just a few blocks down Fifth to Main Street where he worked. At the time it seemed as though everything was working out well for Wiley. The tragedy is that, living on his own, Wiley was unable to maintain his sobriety. He started drinking again, lost his job as a security guard and within a matter of months died in his apartment; he literally drank himself to death.

His family asked Bev Cosby and me to speak at his memorial service. We did so, sharing, among other things, our vision for The Haven. During the reception after the service, Wiley's two sisters and brother shared with us their belief that as long as he was at The Gateway, Wiley would not drink just because it was against the rules. But they worried about him once he started living on his own, because they felt that when living by himself he might isolate and be much more vulnerable to resuming his active drinking. This experience confirmed for those of us in the Mission Group the rightness of the vision we had been carrying. For me personally, Wiley's memory continues to be a major source of inspiration as we move forward carrying The Haven's vision.

[Sharing by Alan & Julia]

The Haven has no paid staff, only volunteers. In addition to the Mission Group, which provides the spiritual undergirding for our work, we have a deeply committed Board of Directors. During the 13 years we have been carrying the vision, it has seemed at times as though it is unfolding very slowly. But it also seems clear that God keeps giving us signs that we are on the right track, and that we just need to be patient.

Another sign came in April 2008, when, in partnership with Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship, we received a Predevelopment Grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to help us determine the feasibility, size, type, and location of the housing facility which we would need for our program. Right away we began to pursue the steps and activities outlined in the Grant, and identified The

Carey House on Rivermont Avenue, which is owned by LCF, as a possible site for our program.

But before we could complete 6 months of work on our Predevelopment activities, we were confronted with a whole new set of circumstances. Our local Community Services Board had closed its 28-day residential treatment program known to many as Arise. At the October 2008 meeting of a coalition of agencies and individuals formed to try to meet the need for substance abuse treatment resulting from the Arise closing, those of us representing The Haven were asked if we would be willing to expand our vision for a long term supportive housing program to include a residential treatment and recovery program as well. I must confess that my immediate personal reaction to the suggestion was “no”, that’s not what God wants us to be working on.

We didn’t know it but God was about to give us another sign. The weekend after the coalition meeting our Mission Group was on retreat at the Church of The Saviour’s Dayspring Retreat Center in Maryland. Friday night I learned that Samaritan Inns, a Church of The Saviour related ministry, had relocated its’ 28-day treatment program into one of its’ long term housing facilities. That combination intrigued me. The next day, while sitting in my room and meditating, suddenly I felt God’s presence like I never had felt it before. No voice, just a powerful presence, strong enough to get me up out of my chair, that was telling me I needed to rethink my original reaction to the idea of expanding our vision for The Haven. When we broke silence on Sunday morning I shared my experience with the other folks on retreat. Alan and Julia were among those present and both affirmed this new dimension of “call” to an expanded vision for The Haven.

Looking back I am convinced that God has been constantly working with us to bring us to this point. Another sign of God’s guiding hand is how we learned about the recovery program model we want to implement locally. Earlier in 2008, during a Sunday visit to a UCC church in Raleigh, I had picked up a brochure about The Healing Place, a very comprehensive recovery program which had a women’s facility located within walking distance of the church, and which used church space for some of its classes. I

told my daughter Cindy, who lives in Raleigh, that I was interested in knowing more about The Healing Place. She immediately arranged for me to go with her to meet the Director and tour the men's facility during our next family visit to Raleigh. We were both very impressed with what we saw, and when I told our Mission Group about it, the other members of the Group became excited and wanted to visit to see for themselves.

Much has happened since my first visit. Numerous trips have been made to Raleigh. The number of visitors from Lynchburg is approaching 35, and another trip is scheduled for June 8. The leadership of The Healing Place in Raleigh has visited Lynchburg and presented their story to people here. The Healing Place has been selected as a model for Virginia, with plans for 4 sites in the state, one of which will serve all of Southwest Virginia and will be located here in Lynchburg.

There is much we don't know about how, when and where The Healing Place will become a reality in our part of the state. But we are convinced that God is with us, guiding us, and that we just need to be listening for that guidance as we continue moving ahead, step by step, one day at a time, in implementing the vision God has given us through The Haven.

You will note that we have included in the bulletin this morning a copy of our commitment statement for The Haven Mission Group, and on the reverse side, the meeting agenda which we follow each week when we are together. If you are interested in knowing more about our Mission Group, please speak to any of us about that. Thank you for letting us share with you this morning.