

## The Haven Mission Group

Sunday Worship, June 2, 2019

The Haven Mission Group: Julia Crim, Katie Epley, Noel Owens & Vince Sawyer

Our name -“The Haven” - comes from Psalm 107. Read Intro to Commitment

For nine years (1994- 2003) I worked at The Gateway, a transitional living facility for homeless men with which some 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, 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 Bev Cosby, Mary Jane Withrow, Alan Womack and I decided to begin a Mission Group focused on bringing into being the longer term facility we believed was so much needed. We began meeting 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, with one enhancement, for 21 years. Our Mission Group provides the spiritual undergirding (inward journey work) for The Haven, Inc., a 501c3 tax exempt corporation. The corporation provides the structure through which we undertake our outward journey work. Three of our current Mission Group members are also board members of The Haven.

I believe sometimes God gives us a special sign that causes us to have a vision of something better that could be. 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 Lynchburg community and live on his own. He had a steady job as a security guard and enough income to rent an apartment. He could walk to work. At that time it seemed as though everything was working out well for him. The tragedy is that, living on his own, Wiley became isolated and 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. Personally, I am still moved by his story. Remembering it confirms for me the rightness of our vision.

In the summer of 2008 we were confronted with a whole new set of circumstances. Our local Community Services Board closed its 28-day residential treatment program known as Arise. At the October meeting of a coalition of agencies and individuals formed to try to meet the need for residential treatment of substance use disorders 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/recovery program. We struggled with that but eventually agreed to take on that responsibility.

Later in 2008, during a Sunday visit to a UCC church in Raleigh, I picked up a brochure about The Healing Place, a 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 us to meet with 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. More than 50 people have visited the program, now known as Healing-Transitions, and have returned convinced we should replicate it in Southwestern Virginia.

After Bev Cosby's death in 2002, The Haven was able to acquire two acres of land and a small historic building on Federal Street from Bev's estate. The land had been used previously by the Wood Ministry and New Land Jobs. Our initial vision included a facility and program on the Federal Street property. But we learned later that to replicate the Raleigh program, we would need at least twice that amount of acreage.

Three years ago, very unexpectedly, The Haven received an offer from Centra Health to purchase our Federal Street property. It was providential. In 2017 we sold the property for more than twice its assessed value, and moved our office to First Christian Church. Last Spring we decided to use the proceeds from the property sale to hire our first ever employee, a person who would help us develop our facilities and program.

We advertised for a Project Director and one applicant out of about 40 stood out. Divine Providence was on display once again. When contacted to set up an interview, the applicant immediately asked "By any chance is The Haven related to the Church of The Covenant?" The answer of course was "Yes". It turned out that the applicant had been a member of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, whose pastor was Bev Cosby's brother Gordon. He also had worked for Samaritan Inns in Washington, a Church of the Saviour ministry for homeless and addicted men and women. His name is Niles Comer and he moved to Lynchburg and began working for The Haven July 1<sup>st</sup> of last year.

At the same time Niles began his work with us, we also contracted with Dennis Parnell, the successful developer of the program in Raleigh, to act as a Strategic Consultant who would work with Niles. Working together we have developed a Strategic Plan which calls for a 150 bed men's facility in Roanoke first, followed by a 100 bed women's facility in Lynchburg. To make the best use of Niles' time, and to eliminate the travel costs resulting from his commuting to Roanoke, Niles moved to Roanoke at the end of March.

Dennis Parnell has also been joined by a second consultant named Tom Niemann, who has extensive expertise in real estate and tax credit opportunities. At a recent meeting of the Roanoke Valley's Collective Response group (an all-inclusive comprehensive effort to deal with the disease of addiction inspired by the deaths resulting from the opioid epidemic in the Roanoke Valley) we had five representatives from The Haven, the most of any organization present. We are now making exciting progress in developing partnerships with other organizations in Roanoke and our board is meeting twice monthly. Called meetings each month are dedicated solely to updates from Dennis, Tom and Niles about our project's progress.

As we share with you this morning, we don't know for certain that our dream will become a reality. But we are convinced that God is with us. We believe God was with us when we learned about the Raleigh program in 2008. We believe it was God's doing that our property on Federal Street sold for more than twice its' assessed value. We believe that God sent us Niles Comer, and that it was providential that Dennis Parnell was available to work with us as a consultant. We believe God has been guiding us, and that we just need to trust that everything will work out as we work one day at a time to do our part. And we have to trust that, as we see the proceeds from our property sale getting smaller each month, God is still with us and will provide us with what we need in the days and months ahead.

In closing, we thank you for letting us share with you this morning. If you are interested in knowing more about our MG and The Haven, please speak to us during fellowship and refreshments in the Lodge.