

FISH in Williamsburg - A History of the Founding and Early Years - 1975 - 1986

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One fall afternoon in 2014, a group of women met at the Historic Triangle Building to recall the early days of the organization FISH. Marian Bennett, Ling Ngo, Nancy Lubrano, and Sherry Welter, were among the first organizers of FISH in Williamsburg. Although it had been years since they had worked together as FISH volunteers, they expressed great joy at rekindling friendships formed decades ago.

The task at hand was to recollect the founding and early days of FISH:

- How did these founders come together?
- Who volunteered in those first years?
- What services did FISH provide?
- What support did FISH receive from local churches and organizations?

And perhaps most of all,

- Why did these busy young women feel compelled to action?

Karen Berquist took notes and recorded the conversations and Sally Fisk took candid photos. This narrative is composed from their recollections. We hope it preserves a useful history of the founding and first decade of FISH, the contributions of its many volunteers, and the collective community support that has helped many neighbors in times of need. Few documents remain from the first years, but included with this text are a copy of the original article that appeared in Reader's Digest in January 1969; directions for volunteers dated 1979 – 1980; lists of volunteers by service category from the early 1980s; and a directory from the mid-1980s.

1969 - Inspiration from Reader's Digest

In 1960, Reggie and Ling Ngo moved to Newport News, Virginia, and became parishioners at the mission church that later became St. Jerome Catholic Church. In winter of 1969, Ling read Reader's Digest article, "A Friendly Neighbor Called Fish," describing the grassroots efforts of Anglican minister, Reverend Derek Eastman, and his congregation in Old Headington, near Oxford, England.

The story moved Ling to action. The Catholic Church, had recently put forth a call to lay ministry; and although the call to acts of mercy is centuries-old, there was something new and exciting in the spirit of Vatican II. The call also resonated with the spirit of compassion and caring that Ling had learned from her Buddhist grandmother. Ling wrote to Reverend Eastman and received a lengthy letter in reply. He encouraged her to do what she could in her community to establish a volunteer service group using his simple project as a model.

In addition to informational brochures and suggestions for organizing, Reverend Eastman shared the spirit of how the work should be done. Ling recalls that he told them to "work simply, as caring neighbors." He reminded her that although actions would be helpful to others, there would also be times when the most important thing a person could do for another was to "just listen."

St. Jerome's pastor, Father Frank Hendrick, supported the idea of a FISH volunteer program in his parish, and meetings to organize and recruit volunteers soon followed. Volunteers signed up to cook and deliver meals, provide transportation, babysit, or supply clothes. That year, FISH at St. Jerome's became one of hundreds of volunteer groups that sprang up as a result of this one Reader's Digest article.

1974 - FISH Comes to Williamsburg

The Ngo family moved to Williamsburg in 1974 and joined the congregation at St. Bede Catholic Church. There, Ling met Sister Nancy Lydon, a young nun from the Sisters of Mercy who taught at Walsingham Academy, served as St. Bede's Social Ministry organizer, and played the drums in the folk group. Sister Nancy encouraged Ling to start a FISH program in Williamsburg. St. Bede pastor, Father Anthony Warner agreed and meetings were held and volunteers recruited. By 1975, Williamsburg had its first group of FISH volunteers.

How it Worked:

Calls for assistance were infrequent in those first years, perhaps only two or three per month. An answering service was the group's only paid expense and the handful of volunteers rotated their on-call days. Requests for food, clothes, shelter, and other assistance, were forwarded to the volunteers. Individuals were responsible for all requests that came in on their on-call day, but they would also contact other volunteers to help gather clothes, cook a meal, or help in any way needed. If the request included items like gas, hotel stay, or bus tickets, the volunteers paid for these out of their own pockets. Sherry Welter recalled that in the early years, an arrangement was in place with Mr. Washington, owner of the Exxon station, to provide gas on credit to later be reimbursed by the volunteers.

Shortly after I moved to Williamsburg in 1978, I experienced how this small group of volunteers worked. My children and I were at Marian Bennett's house when she received a phone call from Nancy Lubrano, the FISH volunteer on duty that week. Nancy had received a request for children's clothes. She knew Marian's son was about the same size as the young boy in need of clothing: Did Marian have something to offer from her son's closet? It was that simple. Marian gathered a few gently-used items to deliver to the Lubranos' house. Nancy gathered clothes from her own children's dressers, and then sorted, folded, and delivered the clothing.

This simple gesture of neighborly concern for a stranger's family left me deeply impressed. I wanted to take part in this kind of sharing and helping, as did dozens of others who heard about FISH or saw its volunteers in action, and over the years, the roster of volunteers grew.

A directory from 1979-1980 includes guidelines for volunteers, the steering committee members, and lists of people who would provide cooked meals, clothes, transportation. Others signed up to babysit, read to the blind, do housework, and provide companionship for seniors and teenagers.

Some requests did not fall neatly into these categories as the "24-hour" list in the same directory shows; people on this list might be called upon at any time for any reason. Ling Ngo recalls serving as a translator for speakers of Tagalog and Chinese. Sherry Welter remembers when she and her husband Bill, along with Ling and her husband Reggie, gathered and delivered blankets, food, and clothes to a family who had lost their home in a fire on New Year's Eve. In another case, the Welters delivered food and chopped wood for an elderly man who heated his home with a wood stove. Each volunteer had memories of taking her children along as helpers to visit shut-ins, deliver food and clothes, or provide a hot meal. They believed these experiences of seeing others in

need and providing help would make their children more aware of the world around them and more generous and caring.

The structure was simple and effective. Both the roster of volunteers and the number of calls per week grew as police, social services, and churches became aware of the many ways FISH volunteers were willing to help their neighbors in need.

1980 - 1984 Growing Years

Many events in the early 1980s impacted social service needs in Williamsburg. Among them, Eastern State Mental Health facility lost funding and eliminated housing services dramatically. At the same time, Williamsburg's hotel and restaurant industries were expanding. Those who worked in low-paying service industry jobs often worked several part-time jobs to bring home a wage that barely covered basic expenses. An unexpected setback: an illness, a broken-down vehicle, or unanticipated expenses could push families from "just-getting-by" to being in need of assistance.

Churches found an increasing number of people coming directly to their doorsteps asking for help with food, clothes, and bills; as needs grew, church referrals to FISH volunteers increased. These same church communities became an important source for volunteers, food and clothes donations, and funding. A few churches provided the space necessary to establish a food pantry and a supply of clothes.

Tracing the locations for the food pantry and clothes closet from the early 1980s to 1994 reflects the growing support from area churches. The food pantry's first homes were in the St. Bede rectory basement, and later in a room in St. Bede Parish Center. When St. Bede could no longer host the pantry, the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists provided space in Fahs house, their newly-purchased property on Ironbound Road. The pantry remained in the Fahs House until its move to the Historic Triangle Building in 1994.

The clothes closet also moved between many locations. The first clothes closet was in a volunteer's home. Later, Williamsburg Baptist Church on Richmond Road provided the first church location, organized and cared for by Petey Pope and husband, George. When the need for more space grew, the clothes closet relocated and expanded into a house at the corner of Burns Lane and Jamestown Road owned by the First Church of Christ, Scientist. Every inch of space was in use by the next move, and the timing was perfect! When the church was ready to raze its house for new construction in 1994, the Historic Triangle Building was ready for use. Finally food and clothes were located in the same space!

In addition to providing homes for the growing food pantry and clothes closets, churches offered to meet specific types of support. For several years, St. Stephen Lutheran Church, St. Bede, and Wellspring Methodist Church provided space for overnight stays. A volunteer unlocked the church rooms, helped the person get settled in for the night and returned the next morning - often with a hot breakfast - to send the lodger on his or her way.

The local Quaker community formed the core of the transportation service for many years. Their volunteers recruited drivers and made countless calls to assign drivers to ride requests.

Eventually, an additional food pantry was established at Hickory Neck Episcopal Church to serve those in the western part of James City County. Money for emergency purchases, generally under \$20, was available from Walnut Hills Baptist Church, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, and St. Bede. Sister Berenice, a teacher at Walsingham Academy took on an increasingly important role in local affairs as St. Bede's Social Ministry director.

Sister Berenice worked closely with FISH volunteers and obtained vouchers for meals for those in the overnight shelters. Her years of dedicated ministry earned her the title of Williamsburg's own Mother Theresa.

The 1980's: A New Decade, a New Routine

With official spaces for food and clothes in place, volunteers no longer need to raid their own pantries or shop for food requests. Finding clothes became easier with items organized in a tidy, well-run Clothes Closet. Even so, a day on-call was demanding. The number of calls per day increased to two to five requests on weekdays. Enough volunteers were recruited to serve on a specific day of the month. To fill requests, they made separate trips to gather food from the food pantry and select clothes from the clothes closet. Working with the age, size, and gender for each request, the volunteers would select three outfits for every-day use, including underwear, shoes, and coats, or other specific items. A fourth outfit for church, dress occasions, or job interviews would also be provided.

Bags in tow, volunteers might leave items for pick-up in the foyer at St. Bede Parish Center or deliver food and clothes directly to the recipient. A typical schedule for a day would be to take calls at home from morning until about 3pm; travel to the food pantry to pack groceries and load them into the car; travel to the clothes closet to select clothes and pack them in the car; and to then start deliveries around 5pm. In the evening, the on-call volunteer would forward details for transportation requests to the next person on-call that week. The day on-call became busier each year. It would still be many years before the move to a central location in the Historic Triangle Building in 1994 brought efficiencies for volunteers and clients.

The routine for food and clothes was time-consuming, and volunteers rarely had time to personally provide special services, like emergency babysitting, transportation, hot meals, or companionship. Instead, volunteers relied on contacts in the directory. Referrals to other helping organizations became another part of the FISH volunteer routine.

1982 - The Covenant – Fish and Ecumenical Outreach Ministries (E.O.M.)

The Covenant between FISH and E.O.M. was intended to be a pledge of solidarity and cooperation between these two service organizations. Each one worked independently, each was supported by a core of churches and individuals, and each relied on dedicated volunteers to reach out to provide food, clothes, and other assistance. In 1982, E.O.M. director Carletha Morris approached St. Bede pastor, Father George Zahn with the idea of a covenant. The Williamsburg Pastoral Council embraced this gesture of solidarity between two growing, all-volunteer service organizations. Each would retain its name and board of directors. E.O.M. would offer screening services for requests for money for fuel and utilities. Food and clothes requests would be met by the well-established FISH pantry and Clothes Closet, as well as the auxiliary pantries at E.O.M. and Hickory Neck Episcopal Church. Members of the clergy, volunteers from E.O.M. and FISH, and many community service workers joined in a beautiful service to commemorate their covenant at the church on Jamestown Island in September, 1982. The covenant pledged volunteers' faith and prayer support as they joined in serving the poor and needy in Williamsburg.

The 1986 FISH directory reflects the joined resources of FISH and E.O.M., and a newsletter article from 1985 recalls the spirit and purpose of the covenant.

Small Gestures, Big Changes

It is stunning to reflect on the outcome of one person being inspired by a small article in a popular magazine.

Between 1975 and 1986, FISH in Williamsburg grew from a few dedicated volunteers to a prominent, reliable, and well-respected community resource. Every major church group and many smaller ones were drawn to recruit volunteers and provide support for FISH.

This history is unfinished and remains a draft. We invite others to supply additional details and correct errors and omissions. We welcome recollections of the events that began in the late 1980s leading to the current location in the Historic Triangle Building and operations today.



On December 1, 2014, the founders and first volunteers of FISH in Williamsburg met to recall its early years. Ling Ngo and Nancy Lubranobrowse review a directory of volunteers titled: *St. Bede's Fish Organization, 1979-1980*.



Marian Bennett recalls the first volunteers.



Marian Bennett and Karen Berquist.



Ling Ngo, Karen Berquist, and Sherry Welter at work.



Ling Ngo, Marian Bennett, Nancy Lubrano, and Sherry Welter at the recollections work session.

