

A Moment for Mission: Pennsylvania Church Discovers Mission at Home

The First Presbyterian Church in Oil City, Pennsylvania, discovered that a call to mission can come from its own community. During the summer of 2005, a team of twenty-five youth and adults traveled to Kentucky to remodel and renovate houses. But when Elder Gordon Johnson reported on the trip to the congregation, he added an appeal for volunteers who were willing to work to make a home accessible for one of their own church members. The congregation responded by joining in a close-to-home mission project.

In July 2005, Janet Crawford suffered a stroke following heart surgery. She lost the use of her legs. For more than six weeks, she was hospitalized at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

It soon became apparent that Janet could not return to her home. The first floor bathroom had no shower. The patio she and her husband Alistair enjoyed was at least six inches below the level of the rest of the house. Janet would not be able to get to the couple's van or to the back yard because there were no ramps.

Gordon's announcement set off a series of changes for the church and for the Crawfords. While Janet was in the hospital, eight to ten men gathered at the Crawford home every day. They enclosed the patio and raised the floor so that Janet could roll out in her wheelchair. They installed carpeting and heating. They expanded the bathroom and added a shower. They built a sidewalk to enable Janet to get into the van and ramps to the sidewalk and to the back yard. Every day the women brought lunch for the workers and when the construction was finished, they gathered to paint the remodeled home. Community businesses partnered with the church by contributing the shower module and the labor needed to refit the drapes. Neighbors from other churches joined the team to add an ecumenical dimension. Throughout the project, Gordon was advised by the Reverend Sue Montgomery, consultant for mobility and accessibility for the Presbyterian Church USA.* Alistair recalls that it was sometimes a shock "to come home from the hospital and see the changes." He described the work as "miraculous" and added, "It's hard to believe that we can have friends like that."

An accessible house is not the only change for the Crawfords. An elevator lift in the church building will be completed during the summer of 2006. Janet and others, whose mobility is challenged, will no longer face architectural barriers in their multilevel church home.

The Crawfords have been members of the First Presbyterian Church since the 1970's. Janet is a retired public school music teacher who, before her stroke, sang in the church choir, played in the bell choir, and played French horn in the community symphony. She says, "Besides my family, music is my life." Alistair, a retired history professor, loves to talk about his Scottish heritage.

Oil City is in the Appalachian Mountains, just outside the Allegheny National Forest. Formerly the center for oil-related industry, the city lost much of its population and many community resources when the refineries moved. Since then, the area has been considered depressed.

Nevertheless, First Presbyterian Church, with a membership of 240, continues its active mission outreach. During the summer of 2006, volunteers will renovate houses in Virginia. Gordon Johnson describes the church as "small but mighty."

The Reverend Jo Filer added that the project gave the church "a whole sense of mission as being at home as well as away." He said that it made people more aware of the needs in the community. "The needs around us present an opportunity for at-home mission."

The call to mission takes many forms and comes to us many different ways. The First Presbyterian Church of Oil City responded by making two houses accessible – the Crawfords' personal home and their church home. The household of God is enriched, as Janet is able to use her many gifts in the service of God.

***See the flyer describing the Disability Concerns Consultants included in these materials.*