***The Senior Connections Ministry***

*“Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent.” Psalm 71:9*

A new reality of old age is taking place in America.  Over 25 million Americans aged 60+ are economically insecure—living at or below 250% of the federal poverty level (FPL) ($29,425 per year for a single person).  These older adults struggle with rising housing and health care bills, inadequate nutrition, lack of access to transportation, diminished savings, and job loss. For older adults who are above the poverty level, one major adverse life event can change today’s realities into tomorrow’s troubles.  Here’s a quick look at some of the things that Journey of Faith has done to help change the story of aging in Washtenaw County so that seniors don’t have to go at it alone.

***“Rhea will simply tell you: “Journey of Faith saved our lives.”* [Read more … ]**

A senior citizen on a fixed income can quickly find themselves in crisis, which can jeopardize her ability to maintain her independence.  Rhea and her daughter, who suffered with chronic medical issues, had been evicted from their home.  Rhea’s only source of income was her monthly social security check and the amount had barely budged while health-care and other costs had soared.  Unfortunately, the cost of housing and medication became a crushing burden for them.  For a year, Rhea and her daughter lived at various campsites throughout Washtenaw County in the family car.

Rhea heard about Journey of Faith’s Soap & Suds ministry from a homeless friend.  Rhea and her daughter regularly visited Journey of Faith to use the church’s shower and laundry facility.  The church gifted them with meals, sleeping bags, blankets, money for gas and even a propane heater to fight off the winter cold in a run-dawn shack in the woods.  Last fall, Journey of Faith helped move Rhea and her daughter into a new apartment.

***Barb, a participant in Journey of Faith’s “Conversation About Aging & Caregiving” session last November, noted: “Even though it’s a gift to still have your parents, it can be really rough.”***

Not many years ago, Barb planned to spend her retirement putting to good use her “Certified Master Gardner” skills and visiting with grandchildren.  Probably not on her list of golden-years pursuits was spending so much time helping to care for a frail elderly parent. Barb and her mother are part of what many experts are seeing as a growing phenomenon: Children, 60-70 years old, spending their retirement years caring for parents who are in their 90s and beyond.  Because of longer life spans, many adult children and their parents are now “aging together.”  People in their late 60s and early 70s thought this would be a time of life when some of their responsibilities would drop off.

Self-care can be tough in the best of circumstances, but it’s especially difficult for people who spend the majority of their time caring for someone else.  One of the things Barb really appreciated about Journey of Faith was the effort the church made to reach out to caregivers last winter, especially around the holidays, which can become a stressful time of the year for families.  Barb adds, “Having people to talk to who understand all of the emotions you're feeling and who get the daily grind is really helpful.” Journey of Faith offered a unique way of communicating love and compassion, and more importantly, the gospel of Christ to someone who is laying down a part of her life for another.

***Community Champion, Alex excitedly responded to Joanne’s idea:  “It’s not a bad way for a small church to help young teens and seniors connect with each other and bridge the years by mixing it up!***

Using data from the Opportunity Index (<https://www.washtenaw.org/2480/Opportunity-Index>), Opportunity Atlas (<https://www.opportunityatlas.org/>), and United Way of Washtenaw County's Community Impact Initiatives, the church’s Senior Connections Ministry is focusing on building a coalition of churches located in the 48197 and 48198 zip code areas for the first phase of its’ community engagement activities.  Those areas have some of the seniors with the most pressing needs. The team participated in a focus group session with five West Willow community members on July 6th and listened to the group’s discussion on the most pressing needs and concerns of seniors in their neighborhood.

Journey of Faith’s Board voted to help support an initiative that the New West Willow Neighborhood Association (NWWNA) and Habitat for Humanity have recently begun by donating $2,500 from the church’s Generations Program.  To help maintain rental and owner-held property where the elderly lived, Habitat for Humanity has supplied lawnmowers and gardening tools to use on the overgrown and untidy lawns of seniors.  This was something seniors were struggling with in their neighborhoods, including, facing fines for properties that weren't being maintained.  Also, NWWNA had an interest in helping low-income students get summer jobs.  The donated funds from Journey of Faith will help pay students in the neighborhood to provide lawn care for seniors.

The plan is for students to offer services and their work to be overseen by church volunteers, as well as, encourage the students to connect with seniors in the neighborhood.  The goal is to help teens make some money this summer by cutting the lawns of the elderly who don't have the money or mobility to do it themselves.  Our community champion, Alex Thomas will be working with a community member (interested in learning advocacy and problem-solving skills) to follow-up with landlords who have the worst record of maintaining their properties and residents who struggle with caring for their lawns.  Alex Thomas will be recruiting volunteers from the six churches in West Willow as part of Journey of Faith’s initiative to establish a network of churches willing to share their resources and collaborate on support.

**One Last Story …**

Josephine self-identifies as a 70+ Community Advocate.  She spends six days out of the week talking to seniors about their problems and trying to connect them to resources in the community.  Recently, one of the most fulfilling connections we made was with a 61 year-old grandmother raising three of her grandchildren. When parents are absent or unable to raise their children, grandparents are often the ones who step in.  Raising a second generation brings many rewards, including the fulfillment of giving your grandkids a sense of security, developing a deeper relationship, and keeping the family together.  But, it also can come with a high cost.

Grandma had gotten behind on rent payments and her utility bills.  Her landlord didn’t want to lose, in his words, “an excellent renter.”  He worked with our team to negotiate payment arrangements in the amount of $4,000 for past due rent and utility bills.  We were able to get support from community organizations that provide housing assistance, as well as, donations from a Ypsilanti business-woman, Ypsilanti 7th Day Adventist Church and a member of Journey of Faith.  We contacted Latania Fair at Habitat for Humanity’s Financial Education Program to provide Grandma with three months of “one-on-one coaching” on reducing her debt, saving money and budgeting.

***“This is the whole point of what we’re trying to do – helping seniors meet the challenges they’re facing and not doing it alone by themselves.”  --Josephine***

Amen, Josephine! … And, neither is Journey of Faith.  Thank, God!

***We encourage you to partner with us to help improve the lives of seniors!  To explore opportunities, please contact us.***

***-- Diane Smith, Alex Thomas, Josephine Taylor & Jo Ella Coles***