

## **History of United Women in Faith and United Methodist Community House**

In September 1902, a group of women from Grand Rapids 1<sup>st</sup> UMC, who had been studying the book of James, learned about newly arrived Syrian immigrants. Realizing that these families would have special needs, they felt the call to put their faith into action and started “settlement work” among them.

These Methodist women found a storefront property on Ellsworth Avenue and immediately started kindergarten classes and early elementary education for girls. They also offered other needed classes for the women, such as Bible study, citizenship, sewing, handicrafts, and cooking classes. As the community changed, so did the ministries offered...whatever it took to reach out and help meet the needs of people in the community.

After a decade of service, they moved to 314 Wealthy Street, formed a Board, and changed the name to Methodist Community House. In the decades of the 1920's and 30's, depending on available leaders and finances, services expanded to include: Sunday School classes, Boy Scout Troops, a thrift shop, Family Living classes, and, in 1936, they opened a Day Nursery – the first childcare center in the city of Grand Rapids.

Today UMCH is one of just a handful of nationally accredited child development centers in the city of Grand Rapids. It is not just daycare, but it is officially a child development center, providing early education to 3- & 4-year-olds.

In the 1940's, the newly organized Woman's Society of Christian Service (one of the predecessor organizations to United Women in Faith) became the official sponsoring organization of the Methodist Community House.

Eventually, in 1956, all the programs were moved into a newly remodeled and expanded building at 904 Sheldon. The daycare center had two rooms, serving about 30 children. This new facility also included the addition of meeting rooms, craft rooms, office space and a large all-purpose room.

In the 1960's, there were beginnings in community development – students from nearby colleges and universities, as well as VISTA volunteers, served there. At that time, based on the needs of working families, childcare was extended through the summer, including day camps for older children operating at one of the county parks, also a Senior Citizen program began.

Some of you may remember collecting trading stamps (S&H green stamps) for the “purchase” of the first station wagon. A newly formed girls' choir, known as the “Community Singers”, used the station wagon to travel near and far to sing for and about “the Methodist” as it became to be known. They raised funds and also made “the Methodist” more widely known.

In the 1970's, the governing Board changed from being all United Methodists to a combination of 1/3 United Methodists, 1/3 neighborhood residents and 1/3 people from the larger community -- bankers, civic leaders, educators and others. The latter group increased the service connections between the community and UMCH. The Board consisted of 18 members. Currently, the

President of the Michigan Conference United Women in Faith is always on the Board, so during the 4 years I am President I travel to Grand Rapids to attend Board meetings, as those before me have done also. They also allow one additional UWF Board Member, who may be the Western Waters District President, a UWF National Director serving from the Michigan Conference, or another appointee.

In 1972, a Senior Citizen meals program was begun, with about 100 hot meals served daily at UMCH and another 30 meals delivered to homes. Today meals are still served on site and delivered to homes. The meal delivery allows the staff to check on homebound seniors and show loving care and kindness as they deliver the meals.

In 1991, in a leap of faith, the United Methodist Women, with the help of the United Methodist Church and the UMCH Board of Directors, set out on a multimillion-dollar fundraising effort to expand and update the building. Raising over \$2.4 million dollars in about 2 years, the building was enlarged to 3 times its former size and now had 180,000 square feet, including a gym, additional childcare rooms, computer rooms, a library, 6 large multi/purpose rooms (one was named for each of the 6 Districts of the West Michigan Conference), 2 lighted parking lots, an improved playground, a pathway and a patio area called “the Bishop’s Back Yard”.

Later in the 90’s, while Patsy Coffman was Conference President, she talked with the President of the Conference United Methodist Men and invited them to have their meetings at UMCH. In addition, she asked them to consider taking on some of the “fix-it” projects there. They showed up one day with chain saws and rakes and cleaned up and restored the entire back yard.

In 2015 a team of 8 women from the Detroit and West Michigan Conference United Methodist Women (UMW) Leadership Teams met to collaborate on the future of their joint ownership of the UMCH facility at 904 Sheldon in Grand Rapids as the two conferences prepared to merge in 2019. The conversations covered maintenance, repairs and general upkeep needs of the facility; providing and raising funds; UMCH programs being provided in the community; and the Detroit Conference UMW President becoming an active UMCH Board member. The Detroit Conference UMW became a significant financial partner, contributing funds for building and programming activities.

Until 2018 the West Michigan Conference United Methodist Women owned the building with the deed held in their name and provided it rent free to UMCH. We also took responsibility for the annual building insurance, considering that to be part of supporting the ministries provided there.

In 2019, prior to our merger with the Detroit Conference United Methodist Women, we deeded the building over to United Methodist Community House. This gave UMCH the ability to obtain grants and leverage the building ownership for future expansion and growth.

The current building at 904 Sheldon continues in ministry – adapting to and meeting the needs of their changing community. Everyday many children, youth and seniors are served through the programs offered on site and throughout the community. But there are still many unmet needs of those in our neighborhood.

Soon UMCH, the only United Women in Faith National Mission Institution in Michigan, will be breaking ground on a major, visionary, expansion project. Through a combination of public, government, and private funding, they will be building 40+ affordable housing units for seniors - including a senior center, expanded child development/childcare space for 0-4-year-olds - including 2<sup>nd</sup> shift and drop-in care, a fresh market selling fresh, locally grown produce and healthy foods on a sliding scale, and intergenerational programming space to bring all ages together. Creating a place for children to get their best start in life, a place for older adults to feel connected and supported, a place for families to find needed resources, and a place for their community to belong - together.

Ways you can help - pray for UMCH staff and volunteers as they share God's love in their community; pray for the children, youth, families, and seniors who are served through the programs; give to support the current programs and the visionary expansion project they are undertaking.

Michigan Conference United Women in Faith and United Methodist Church remain committed partners with United Methodist Community House in this upcoming project, 120+ years in, as we continue to put our faith, hope, and love into action!