

The Creation of Covenant House of West Virginia

An Oral History

Edited by Julie Pratt • February 2013

Editor's Note: Many people attribute the beginning of Covenant House to Pat Hussey and Barbara Ferraro, whose dynamic leadership and advocacy invigorated the organization for 25 years. The two women, who were Catholic nuns at the time, started their work in the small green house next door to St. John's Episcopal Church. By the time they retired in 2006, Covenant House was firmly established as a community institution in a spacious new building on Shrewsbury Street.

When current director Ellen Allen asked me to interview people about the earliest history of Covenant House, I immediately thought of Barb and Pat. But Ellen said, no, I mean before Barb and Pat. I was intrigued. Covenant House was well-established by the time I moved to West Virginia in the late 1980s. What was this "before"?

I began peeling back the layers of history to the late 1970s, when a small band of people from downtown Charleston churches and Temple Israel decided to do something about homelessness. There was no grant to do this, no master plan, and no guarantee that their considerable work would reap any benefits.

Their path revealed itself with each action taken, starting with church staff deciding to eat lunch with a homeless man in the church kitchen instead of sending him off with a voucher for a local diner. The church people learned from the people they sought to serve. Progress was made in fits and starts. There was controversy about how to best help the homeless and about the role of the church.

Yet the small band of people grew. They put service above politics. They formed an interfaith council. They established nonprofit corporations that responded to the real needs of real people. They found resources to start programs and hire staff. Manna Meal, Covenant House, Health Right and HospiceCare are all testaments to the vision and labor of community volunteers during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In November 2012, I interviewed four of the people who played pivotal roles in the creation of Covenant House: Bob Rodecker, the first board president; Pat Perelman, the first interim director; Jim Lewis, the rector of St. John's Episcopal Church at the time; and Milford Ziegler, who organized the renovation of the little green house. Others also contributed valuable details, including Janet Morris, the archivist at St. John's; Bettijane Burger, a member of Christ Church United Methodist; and the Charleston Gazette.

The following story emerged from this research, offering valuable insights about how one community changed its relationship with people who are poor.

Manna Meal and the seeds of social ministry

Bob Rodecker found himself at the intersection of faith and vocation after he moved to Charleston with his wife, Deborah, in 1973. A young lawyer committed to environmental and social justice, he'd taken a job with the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund (Appalred). He and Deborah became members of St. John's Episcopal Church after attending a Christmas Eve service there. During the next decade, Bob helped shepherd the development of Manna Meal and then Covenant House.

"The program Manna Meal started at St. John's in the mid 1970s," said Bob. "The idea arose out of a recognition of need on the staff's part, both Jim Lewis and his assistant Dick Schmidt, and one of the members of the church who worked there full time, Virginia Adams.

"Virginia was just an incredible lady, a cigar-smoking, really progressive woman. At that time she was at least in her sixties, and we were in our thirties. It was great to have this connection with someone who really understood some of the issues involved in downtown Charleston and the fact that there were people coming to the church every day who needed something and were looking for assistance from the church. Virginia's the one who basically was responsible for instigating the idea of Manna Meal.

"The first person served by what became Manna Meal was a man named Oscar, who the church staff decided they ought to provide lunch to, rather than do what a number of the downtown churches were doing at the time, which was either to hand out a chit to the Quarrier Diner or to give them a bag lunch out the back door. Virginia felt that there was a need for an active ministry to people looking for assistance. So they went into the church kitchen and had lunch with Oscar, which led to Manna Meal.

"I had met Oscar when I was a staff attorney at Appalred. Because I was engaged in legal services for the low income, the church staff had sent Oscar over to me to see if I could help him on a domestic relations issue, which I worked with him on. Because I was involved in low-income advocacy as an attorney, and that was consistent with some of the issues that were being brought to the church through the institution of Manna Meal, Jim Lewis asked me if I would get involved with the Manna Meal program and try to organize it because it had started to grow."

"In 1977 we hired Judy Teel, who served as the executive director of Manna Meal until approximately 2006. I was the chairman of what was then the Manna Meal committee. We decided to organize as a non-profit corporation in 1978, and it became Manna Meal, Inc., in order to garner support from a larger community than just St. John's. We had a board of directors, and I was the first president of the board of directors."

Reverend Jim Lewis came to Charleston with his wife Judy and their children in 1974 to become the rector of St. John's Episcopal Church. The textbook war erupted a month after their arrival, and Jim didn't hesitate jumping into the fray. During his eight

years at St. John's, Jim focused on finding ways for the church to be open and welcoming, including blessing same-sex couples and offering space for good causes.

"Churches have a long history of giving money to things," said Jim. "You won't find a church here that doesn't give money to good things. But when you start talking about moving in for a meal, like we did with Manna Meal, then you've got another story. And so the congregation had to learn, had to grow into that. I had to grow into it. We all had to grow into it.

"The congregation grew into what it had prayed for and what it had hoped for and what it had hired me to do. People never know what they're asking for. They ask for something but they don't know what that means. For example, we prayed for people of all sorts and conditions. That's right out of the prayer book. Well when poor people started coming there, it was hard, but remember we've been praying for that for a long time here. The prayer book goes back to 1600s."

More than a meal

"Manna Meal wasn't just St. John's," Jim Lewis was quick to point out. "We wanted to open this up to get support from other churches and other organizations."

And the support came, with volunteers from various faith groups appearing daily to chop vegetables, greet diners, serve food and wash dishes. One of the volunteers was Pat Perelman, who worshipped at Christ Church United Methodist, located down the street from St. John's. Pat had lived around the world with her husband, Bob, a project manager for Union Carbide. In each place they lived, Pat found her niche as a volunteer serving people in need.

"Bob and I returned to Charleston in the fall of 1980 from Princeton, New Jersey, where I had been the Crisis Minister for Nassau Presbyterian Church," said Pat. "I started volunteering at Manna Meal, and it became obvious to me that the people needed more than food. They needed someone to listen to their needs and direct them to some positive action."

Jim Lewis observed the same needs and saw people from the community stepping forward to respond.

"There was a lot of germination going on, and a whole lot of seeds were being planted," said Jim. "If you look at the history, you can see that Health Right had its early start right there at St. John's. Pat Murray, a local doctor, and his wife, Susan Green, worked at Cabin Creek clinic, and they came to Manna Meal once a week and helped people. So the church saw itself as a seed-planting place for the larger community that would gather more support from the community to support those ministries."

Gaston Caperton, a St. John's member and insurance executive at the time, flew a small group to Washington, D.C., on his company plane to visit programs there.

"The first place we stopped was in Baltimore," said Bob. "We went to Johns Hopkins, where they had a Hospice program, and talked to the people about what would be involved in getting the Hospice started. Then we went to Washington and met with Mitch Snyder, an activist with the catholic worker movement who was involved in a free clinic, a drop-in center and free food service. The drop-in clinic was interesting because it was related to something that was already going on at the Manna Meal that ultimately led to Health Right.

"All of these things were happening independently with the same folks, and it was Gaston's trip that brought the five of us looking into them together. When we came back we decided we needed to have a place and an organization to address these issues, and that's what gave rise to the development of the urban ministry program that ended up being Covenant House."

A full deck of leadership

The momentum toward action continued to build, and the Charleston Interdenominational (now Interfaith) Council on Social Concerns was formed. Art Greenlee from St. John's played a key role in bringing the groups together and served as the Council's first president. Harold Graves from St. Marks Methodist and Helaine Rotgin from Temple Israel were among the first board members, along with other people representing Christ Church United Methodist, Simpson United Methodist, First Presbyterian, Ruffner Presbyterian, Kanawha Presbyterian, Baptist Temple, Trinity Lutheran and St. George's Orthodox Cathedral.

"The faith community has been remarkable in Charleston," said Bob. "There's never been an issue with regard to the activities of feeding the poor, of clothing the poor, of job assistance. These are things that people are committed to, regardless of their politics and regardless of their religion. It's a common language and a common message, a biblical message to help the poor. There really wasn't a political aspect to it. It was just people who were attempting to assist needy people.

"What attracted me to some of this was here I was professionally engaged in litigation against the powers that be. It was law reform and you're trying to change the law and you're trying to change corporate culture, if you will. And so we took on coal companies and the power companies and whatever, and it was a tough battle. Manna Meal and Covenant House provided an opportunity to deal with people in that corporate culture – and not fighting against them – through the churches. I thought it was wonderful.

"People want to do good things for their community, and they don't necessarily want government to do it. I don't have to agree with them on everything, and they

don't have to agree with me on everything, as long as we want to help do what we both think is an important thing."

Jim Lewis observed that it required of a "full deck of leadership" in the work that led to Manna Meal and Covenant House.

"There were a lot of surprises in terms of people who were supportive of the work," said Jim. "In the Bible it talks about saints in Caesar's household. I've always looked for them. They are there, so you just have to find them. They work in a different way than I do; they're not out front. But they were there at St. John's or we couldn't have moved this. You don't move anything in a church without the leadership from the clergy and you don't move anything without the leadership of the people."

The little green house

The Interdenominational Council members did a survey to determine what was most needed in the community. Their first project was to create a drop-in center that would link homeless people with services and resources. An ideal location for the program was the little green house next to St. John's, with its easy access for people who came to Manna Meal.

The problem was that the house was in poor condition and would be costly to renovate. But help soon appeared from unexpected sources. Al Thalheimer from the Temple paid for a new roof. Milford Zeigler, who worked for Gaston Caperton's insurance company, found donated materials and put together a construction crew of work release prisoners.

"One day Jim Lewis and I were in the library at St. John's talking about something and in come these two men," Bob recalled. "They said they understood that we had this project over here and they'd like to help out. And it turned out Milford was very active in the black community. He was a good outreach person.

"Milford was responsible for organizing the renovation of Covenant House, which took a long time and a lot of volunteer effort. Milford was very actively involved in getting it off the ground. The workers were guys who were staying at the prison release center downtown. They would live there and then work during the day at Covenant House putting on siding, fixing up the interior and all of that.

"Milford also organized a number of black churches to come in and provide meals every day for the workers. The churches would bring in their food to room 109 of St. John's and serve lunch every day. It was the first effort to mobilize and bring the black community together with the Interdenominational Council."

Milford Zeigler grew up in Raleigh County and came to Charleston after serving in the army as a Green Beret. He was hired by Gaston Caperton in 1975 as the

community service director at McDonough-Caperton Insurance, which later became Acordia. Milford had a talent for spearheading community projects. He was able to attract volunteers and donations for everything from renovating the Mattie V. Lee Home to getting a busload of kids to the State Fair.

“These guys learned a lot, and they had a chance to do something,” Milford said of his work crew at Covenant House. “There was a different attitude they took about people, about caring. They were just different people when they left. It gave them all the confidence in the world.

“And the labor union people were with us. They said if you can change those men and help them be better citizens, we’re going to be with you on this. And the president of the union said to me, ‘We have no complaint. You all have proved yourselves.’

“Reverend Lewis was really doing spiritual work. To me this was the greatest church in the world because he were taking time with these guys, like this is my brother and this is my sister. Some people didn’t like it at first having the prisoners there, but then they began seeing the results. And they said thank you, because you’re showing us what spirituality is all about, not just about coming here on Sunday but about helping people help themselves and about helping our community.”

A grand opening

The building renovation was completed in spring 1981. The Council had conducted a national search and hired Barb and Pat, but they couldn’t start until fall. Pat Perelman volunteered to serve as interim director. Covenant House opened its doors in late March, providing services Monday through Friday with an all-volunteer staff from the local faith community.

“I told Reverend Lewis that I would like to continue the volunteer work I started at Manna Meal at the new Covenant House,” Pat said. “I had worked with a minister friend of Reverend Lewis in New Jersey, who gave me a reference. I met with the Covenant House board and was approved as the interim Director of Operations for the new house.

“The big thing was just getting it all organized,” said Pat Perelman. “When Covenant House first opened it was havoc. Sixty-five people would show up at one time. We had washers and dryers so people could come get clean clothes. We provided newspapers and telephones so people could call for job interviews. They had a place where they could get mail. They could take a shower.

“And they felt welcomed. We cared about them as persons. It was very important to sit with people and listen to them. It was very comforting that I could do some things for people out of love and for no other reason than that.”

Pat Hussey and Barbara Ferarro came in the fall, and shortly after that Pat Perelman moved with her husband to Alberta, Canada, where she continued her work with homeless people. Barb and Pat moved into an apartment in the back of Covenant House. During the daytime hours they worked in the front of the building as paid staff. There was also space in Covenant House being rented by Hospice and Health Right.

“Pat and Barbara got things going in a big way,” said Bob. “It could never have happened without them. They were so energetic and able to take on these programs and to obtain the funding. They were the ones who did that. You tend then to have a less active board, and so the program was driving the organization as opposed to the organization driving the program. At some point it became clear that the Interdenominational Council became less involved in the responsibility for Covenant House. But the Council is still closely connected with Covenant House.

“I served as the first president of Covenant House for two or three years and then felt it was important to back off, to let other people do it rather than to see this as a program of Bob Rodecker. You want this to be somebody else’s program so it will continue.”

The covenant of Covenant House

The officers of the Interdenominational Council were the officers of Covenant House when it was incorporated in 1981. They considered various names for the organization, and some were concerned that there would be confusion with the well-known Covenant House in New York. But the name Covenant House of West Virginia prevailed.

“The name Covenant House was appropriate,” said Bob, “because it was a kind of covenant, which is a legal term for a contract or an agreement. In biblical terms it was an agreement between God and his people, and it goes across many faiths that a covenant would constitute a concept of an agreement, an agreement between the faith community to assist and work with the poor.”

Larger debates about downtown social ministries had begun during the early organizing of Manna Meal. Some Charlestonians were worried that the programs would attract needy people to the city and wanted to focus instead on “helping our own.” Some members of St. John’s had concerns about providing services to poor people within the church building and wondered if Manna Meal was really needed.

“So we had a congregational meeting,” said Bob. “There was a suggestion that this was a duplication of efforts because the Union Mission had a place downtown where you could get a free meal, so why did we need to do this at St. John’s?”

“Before that meeting, I had gone to the Union Mission and said I’d like to get a free meal. They said no problem, you just have to come and stay for the church service.

Many of the people that had been coming to Manna Meal had made it clear that they really didn't want to be involved in the church service. That was consistent with the concept of both Manna Meal and Covenant House that there was no obligation on the part of the people who came there, and there were no questions asked."

Of the community, for the community

Poverty and homelessness persist in Charleston today, as they do across the nation. But the resources and opportunities for addressing those problems have grown, and the fledgling programs of the early 1980s have become community institutions.

"The whole idea was that this was a lay movement of lay members of all of these faith communities," said Bob. "These are grassroots programs, every one of them. The idea of Hospice in Charleston wasn't limited to Dave Clayman, but he was the person who really drove the issue of getting a Hospice started. And look at it today. It's one of the most successful non-profit corporations in the city. And Health Right has its own facility, program, and physicians and nurses and PAs that volunteer their time. That's all because of people acting without organizations to start something because they knew it was a good thing and they should do it."

In their efforts to change things for the better for homeless people, the early organizers could not escape being changed themselves.

"I remember the night that we had the banquet at the church when the work on the house was done," said Milford Zeigler. "The place was packed, and people were crying, crying with joy. Reverend Lewis said to me, 'Milford, I don't think I've ever felt closer to God.' And I said, 'Reverend, I don't think I have either.' It changed all of us, really."

"Covenant House was just another one of those marvelous extensions into the community that started very small with the congregation's decision to renovate the little green house instead of tearing it down for a parking lot," said Jim. "You have a church with a sign out front that says the Episcopal Church welcomes you, and then you've got clergy and lay people who believed it. And they took steps with me, and I took steps with them. There was something heroic in it both for the church and for me, even though we were fearful of it. Some may not like it, but they want their church to stand up. They want some piece of the change. They really do."

"It was a time when there were people all over the country who were interested in doing something for the country, whether it was in the Peace Corps or Teacher's Corps or whatever," said Bob Rodecker. "Covenant House was really just a recognition of need and response to that need. I'm just proud to have been a part of it."

The interviewees



Jim Lewis, the rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church from 1974 to 1982, has been immersed in social change throughout his life. Bob Rodecker said, “One of the most beautiful things about Jim Lewis is that he touches people. He gets them involved, and then he steps back and hopefully you’ve got people who will carry on. That’s what happened with both Manna Meal and Covenant House.”

Now retired, Jim continues his activism on social issues, including co-founding West Virginia Patriots for Peace, an organization dedicated to mobilizing West Virginians to reclaim and defend American values of peace, justice and democracy at home and abroad.

Pat Perelman has a long history of volunteering for people in need. Her husband Bob said, “She has led a life dedicated to helping other people, without ever seeking publicity for herself. Her understanding of other people is really amazing. This is her God-given talent.”

Now retired, the Perelmans remain active members of Christ Church United Methodist. When a house on the East End was donated to Covenant House, local churches refurbished it as a residence for Covenant House volunteers. Christ Church took responsibility for remodeling the living room and named it the Perelman Room in honor of Pat’s contributions to the founding of Covenant House.



Bob Rodecker has dedicated his career to public interest law, beginning with his work on low-income issues with the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund. He went on to serve as General Counsel to the West Virginia Public Service Commission. Now in private practice, Bob is one of the leading public utility lawyers in the state.

Although his work focused elsewhere in later years, Bob’s commitment to Charleston’s downtown social ministries never waned. He returned to the Manna Meal board of directors in 2008 and has served again as its president since 2009.

Milford Zeigler's unconventional approach to helping his community gained him the reputation as “the man without a budget,” according to *Charleston Gazette* interview. When he saw a project that needed doing, he simply talked to people who had the resources and willingness to help make it happen. His style saved money for struggling local programs and created an investment in those programs by the larger community.

Milton has been honored many times over the years for his service, most recently with a West Virginia Civil Rights Day award from the state's Human Rights Commission in 2012. He is retired from his position as community service director for Acordia after 35 years of service and enjoys lunch every day at Manna Meal.



The editor

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