

The Third Annual Florence Iversen Kraft Congregational Award was presented during the 214th General Assembly to Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church of Alexandria, Virginia.

This award is given each year to a congregation that demonstrates outstanding leadership in its ministry with individuals and their families who have serious mental illness. The Rev. Robert E. Criswell, Pastor and Jeri Fields, Assistant to the Pastor were notified in April of the selection of Mount Vernon. Jeri Fields received the award during the PHEWA Event. A representative of the PSMIN Leadership Team traveled to Alexandria to meet and worship with members of the congregation.

Agape Reservoir: A Ministry of Wholeness with Individuals Affected by Emotional or Mental Disorders

God said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And the Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church (MVPC) session responded, "Here I am; send me!" And the session initiated a task force to explore the feasibility of beginning a ministry of wholeness with individuals affected by emotional or mental disorders.

God said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And members of MVPC responded, "Here I am; send me." And a ministry of wholeness with individuals affected by emotional or mental disorders was born.

God said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And members of MVPC responded, "Here I am; send me!" I can help prepare food, provide transportation, share in a meal, teach a craft or lead a discussion. I can be an extra pair of hands. I can listen. I can share in table conversation."

God said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And members of MVPC continue to respond, "Here I am; send me!" And as a result, a ministry that began November 1999 with only eight individuals now averages 50+ people per week.

As love is received and love is dispersed from the Agape Reservoir, lives are transformed and the healing of the Gospel prevail today, just as they did some 2000 years ago.

Koinonia is the Greek New Testament word that describes the type of fellowship experienced within the early Christian Church. For the early Christians, fellowship meant to share mutual love and concern for one another, to nurture the community and to care for everyone. Koinonia is the type of

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fellowship that best describes the experiences of mutual love and compassion experienced within MVPC's special ministry – Agape Reservoir: A ministry of wholeness with individuals affected by emotional or mental disorders.

Agape Reservoir, a ministry of the Outreach Council, averages 50+ people per week. At least one-fourth of the members of this congregation serve and participate in various aspects of this ministry. Thanks be to God, Agape Reservoir is a growing and thriving ministry.

A Vision Becomes a Reality

Nearly three years ago an elder, whose daughter has a mental illness, encouraged the session to respond to the needs of people who experience emotional or mental disorders and are striving to recover. This elder's vision was to find a way to provide opportunities for "consumers" –those diagnosed with an emotional or mental illness – to experience the fullness of life. A task force of consumers and members from the congregation was formed and soon this group envisioned a new ministry, Agape Reservoir.

During the planning stages, the task force recognized the brutal reality of social stigma on those diagnosed with an emotional or mental disorder. The task force further recognized the myriad of ways this social stigma also heightens the intensity of challenges faced by family members, friends and mental health professionals who live and work with individuals who are diagnosed with emotional or mental disorders. Once the significance of the stigma was recognized, a conscious decision was made by the task force to ensure this ministry would be an inclusive program where consumers and members of the congregation would blend into oneness. After much discussion, the phrase "affected by" was included in the name of the ministry; thereby, inviting anyone who experiences or knows someone affected by such disorders and illnesses to come share in a ministry of fellowship, mutual love and concern for one another.

Models of Ministry

This special ministry met for the first time November 1999. That first evening there were eight participants. Today, this ministry has been the formation of three subgroups:

- Stream of Hope - a support group for parents, spouses and others who are care providers struggling to effectively deal with their situations;
- Stream of Light - a consumer-led group for individuals networking to assess needs within Agape Reservoir so participants might help identify and address specific needs of one another; and
- Stream of Understanding - a consumer-led group for individuals who enjoy writing and sharing their personal stories and interests in a variety of literary genre.

Agape Reservoir is intended to help *all* individuals develop stronger ties with a faith community and to ultimately bridge themselves into the faith community in a non-threatening way. We rejoice and give thanks to God for the ways MVPC is being led down new and exciting paths that witness the Gospel to all who come. Within this ministry, generosity and empowerment - manifestations of God's love - prevail over society's ways of greed and power. Empowered by the Spirit, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Indeed, there's a mystery and magic in the success of Agape Reservoir.

Why the congregation of MVPC is deserving of this award...

Agape Reservoir is a ministry where participants are not so much asked to volunteer their time, but are invited to share their God-given gifts and abilities in a ministry of mutual love and compassion. Children, youth and adults of all ages are invited to come and share in the joys of serving in this special ministry. Their participation generates a context for

- the experience of equality in status,
- elements of Koinonia,
- a community without barriers where there's respect for personal boundaries, and
- dignity for all.

Agape Reservoir is a place where everyone, especially consumers, can come, participate and feel like they are making a difference—and indeed they are making a difference! Agape Reservoir is a place where people come to be loved and accepted for who they are, not who they are. Weekly, the healings of the Gospel take place as people reach out to offer comfort and support, and provide assistance to one another in times of need. Indeed, mutual care and concern for one another, acts of Koinonia, are integral aspects of this ministry.

A steering committee composed of consumers and members of the congregation meets monthly to plan activities, to discuss the future of this ministry and to promote oneness and unity between the congregation and the consumers. As this ministry

grows, care is taken to identify ways to successfully integrate consumers into the life of the congregation. We rejoice that consumers are developing strong ties with the community of faith by attending and/or becoming active members of various church-related activities and that the congregation is growing in its understanding of the nature of mental illnesses and helping consumers overcome its stigma. In addition, many consumers, as well as members of the congregation, are discovering ways in which they've become empowered to use their God-given gifts and abilities in new and exciting ways.

Acts of worship and involvement in mission are important components of this ministry. When the ministry first began, there were several who resisted a prayer circle before the meal and evening program; when God's name was mentioned, one individual would respond, "No God. No God." Today, prayer time before meals may last 20 minutes or longer. Initially, meals lasted approximately 15 minutes; there was little conversation. Today, they share in conversation and enjoy hearing about what has happened to each during the course of the week. Visitors are made to feel welcomed into the family. Hospitality and fellowship are extended. What a blessing it was when those who experience emotional and mental disorders helped to lead worship during Mental Health Awareness Sunday.

Several consumers have also shared their faith journeys during worship and Church School. Mission activities have included ecology projects, the preparation of 176 emergency kits for World Wide Church Services, assistance in church clean-up days and collection and distribution of magazines to various locations. Stream of Light activities involve reaching out to one another in times of need, sometimes purchasing clothing, helping to clean and organize one another's home, assisting those who are moving and providing places to stay while the homeless await housing accommodations. Transportation is provided, as needed, to and from Agape Reservoir and other church-related activities so each has opportunities to participate in the life of the congregation.

Funding received from the budget, designated giving and grants from the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic and the Office of Health Ministries help defray operational costs and provide opportunities for paid work-related experiences and post-high school training. Financial assistance is available to cover extermination costs for pest control, transportation needs and utilities.

Agape Reservoir, filled with love, dispenses love. It's a reservoir of love where individuals come to quench their thirst. Once quenched, out of their hearts flow rivers of living water, acts of compassion which continue to replenish the reservoir so that all might experience the love of God. Blessed to be a blessing to others, MVPC has heard the call of God and responded to the needs of God's people. Praise God from whom all blessing flow! Praise God for the many experiences of Koinonia!