

## **The Humble Beginnings of Christian Neighbors Serving Plainwell, Otsego, and Martin**

For the last forty years countless individuals from across both Allegan and Kalamazoo Counties have poured their time, talents, and treasure into the ministry of Christian Neighbors. Others have heard about some of the ways this agency has helped so many individuals and families but may not be aware of the history or deep relevance it provides to all who walk through the doors.

I have personally witnessed the lives touched and changed through the services of Christian Neighbors. I have also witnessed the faithful support and love provided by hundreds of our neighbors. This writing is for both groups of people and for all who love our communities. I hope you enjoy reading about the humble beginnings of the ministry into which I have poured the last forty years of my life. As I move into retirement, I know my love and a piece of my heart remains with Christian Neighbors. I suspect that may be true for you, too.

### **Timeline from 1983 - 2008**

#### **How it began... 1983**

The Christian Neighbors church service network idea was originally inspired by the Love, Inc. Ministry Model and the Saugatuck-Douglas Neighbors headed by Evert Dykhuis. At the invitation of Pastor Tim Foreman of Otsego Church of God and Pastor Dennis Remenschneider from Hope Lutheran Church in Plainwell, as well as interested lay people, Mr. Dykhuis met with several area church men and women in May 1983 at Otsego Church of God.

The networking was designed to assist churches do a better job helping those in need. As Pastor Foreman explained, churches were often duplicating services to some chronic need persons and then lacked resources to adequately help others. Some pastors and churches were frustrated in trying to provide responsible help and a few had taken a hands-off stance. There had to be a better way. The idea of networking and providing a clearinghouse seemed to be a good solution. The development was slow and halting at first, but within a few months Christian Neighbors began to fly. The office and food pantry of Christian Neighbors were housed in the Seventh Day Adventist Community Service Center in Otsego. The leaders at the time were Alice Hoenes and Patsey Sinkler. Mrs. Hoenes had a master's degree in social work which truly was an asset when evaluating the needs of clients. Alice was coordinator for Christian Neighbors and Patsey headed the food pantry. After Alice retired from her director position, Patsey assumed that role. She held the position until she retired in 1997. At that time, the board recognized the need for a director who could commit to a regular weekly work schedule and have additional computer and administrative skills. Terri Shaler became the first paid Director.

As I present this timeline or brief history of Christian Neighbors it will be from my perspective and minutes kept from 1998 when I became the Executive Director.

When I came on as Treasurer in 1994, Alice Hoenes was serving as Executive Director and Patsey Sinkler was the Food Pantry Director. Eleven years prior to my serving, Patsey brought the food pantry from the basement of the Calvary Community Church on 12th Street in Plainwell to a small shed located in the Seventh Day Adventist Community Center's parking lot on Farmer Street in Otsego. This pantry began as a pilot program of Kalamazoo Loaves & Fishes of Kalamazoo.

It was a great partnership between Christian Neighbors and the SDA Community Service Center (SDACSC). Those in need could come for clothing and household articles provided by SDACSC and when needed, they received food and limited financial assistance from Christian Neighbors. The ministry continued doing great work within the community as an arm of local churches, all the while not having any legal standing as a Michigan nonprofit. Before I began my volunteering as Treasurer in 1994 the financials were kept on a paper ledger by Rock Collinsworth. Patsey paid bills and client rents or utility vendors from a standard checkbook we all used at that time.

Having an associate degree at that time in data processing and accounting, I was determined to transition from the paper ledger to a computer accounting system. The answer to that was Quicken. It took a while and presented a learning curve, but the transition was positive and gave us more professional reporting.

When Patsey asked to step down as Executive Director, I had been serving as Treasurer for three years. This had given me time to learn about the ministry and to develop a passion to see it flourish and grow. In January of 1998, I became the first 'paid' Executive Director beginning with a stipend of \$500 per month provided by local churches. Pastor Tim Foreman, then of Otsego Church of God, gained the support of many local churches to take a big step of faith in this endeavor. This step was one that God would honor. I worked only ten hours a week, so the responsibilities began small and grew from there. Below is a brief timeline of the ministry from 1999.

**1999** – We had not developed a mission statement yet, but our slogan was, "A community caring for itself – An agency making a difference." We didn't have an official board but I was surrounded by great saints from the churches who included: Don Moore from First Baptist Church in Otsego; Paul Wigg from Hope Lutheran; Pat Sinkler from Seventh Day Adventist; Carole Hess from Good Shepherd – Nazarene; Ron Roobol from Martin Reformed; Mary Runchey from Saint Margaret; and my sister Jean Mayrand served as Treasurer. We had begun some life skills classes including goal setting, financial management, parenting, and food budgeting.

One of the first tasks I took on early in 1999 was to secure recognition of Christian Neighbors as a Michigan nonprofit. I had no experience in how to do this, but I used the Internet and the help of a local attorney and accountant to guide me through the process and review all the work before submitting it to the IRS. This was accomplished before the end of that year! Those contributing to the ministry were now able to deduct their support as a charitable deduction. This was great for our supporters and for our agency.

**2000** – One of our first policies was created: Christian Neighbors Ethics & Accountability. It helped form the ethical and moral principles of governance giving additional credibility to the ministry of Christian Neighbors. Carole Hess was our first official Secretary and she volunteered to keep notes of our meetings. We had our first electronic client database developed by Jeff Rus. We now had fax and email capabilities! We were helping approximately 3000 people a year with food and emergency funds for rent, utility, and medical bills. Many of these people would not have qualified to receive assistance through county agencies.

**2001** – Christian Neighbors initiated fundraisers and asked for individual support to provide help to local families who lost income due to the closing of Plainwell Paper Mill. As a result of helping the folks from the paper mill, we met Elaine Hanson who soon would become our second hire at Christian Neighbors. Later that year, we hired Elaine as our Client Intake Specialist. She was a great addition to the ministry and stayed with us until 2009. Nate Mattson became Treasurer this year.

**2002** – This was a busy year! The increase in food requests was noted in all recorded minutes. The small group of leaders that faithfully oversaw the business of the ministry began seeking out community volunteers to grow the Board. Saint Stephens Church (then located in Plainwell) began offering a six-week life skills series. There were many participants, all of whom received a \$50 payment toward a utility bill upon completion of the series. Nancy Minegar assumed the role of Food Pantry Coordinator.

**2003** – The Christian Neighbors Board of Directors grew and became more formal. The new board included: Pastor Tim Foreman (President); Don Moore (Vice President); Carole Hess (Secretary); Nathan Mattson (Treasurer); Blaine & Carol Edgington; Ryan Wieber; Patsey Sinkler; Diana Gilmer. The revenue for 2002 was noted as \$67,162, up from \$52,000 in 1999. Close to 50% of the revenue then came from churches. The ministry was helping an increased number of neighbors in need as more and more learned about our services. I had the pleasure of meeting Marsha Jackson who was then the Executive Director of Loaves & Fishes. This meeting was facilitated by Pastor Joe Shaler of Otsego United Methodist Church. Marsha provided great ideas to improve our food delivery system and a few pointers for increasing our revenue. Our Life Skills Classes continued to grow with additional help from Marg Murphey who retired from Allegan County Human Health Services. Menasha was always very supportive in both the financial and volunteer aspects of the ministry.

**2004** – Charles and Betsy Hill established an endowment fund for Christian Neighbors at the Allegan County Community Foundation. A Finance Team was established that included Nate, Donna Gorton, Doug Drenth, Pat Topping, Nancy Heilig, and me. I often remember when meeting and talking about the need for additional funding, Nancy would lead us in a prayer, throw her hands up and share her famous saying, “Well, we leave it in God’s hands!” Her prayers were always heard and blessed. She was indeed a saint! We began placing envelopes in our Community Shopper’s Guide and The Kalamazoo Gazette once a year. Peggy Toothman at Toothman Printing was instrumental in making this happen. This outreach was an idea from Marsha Jackson, and it helped many more in our community learn about the mission and also served to increase support. Pat Topping, who was then the Director of Baraga Manor, agreed to replace Nate Mattson as Treasurer. Diana Gilmer began her new role as our Board Secretary. New opportunities started with the assistance of the Michigan State University Extension Office and classes were held at Otsego United Methodist Church.

**2005 - Christian** Neighbors became fully insured with Directors & Officers Insurance and Worker’s Compensation. Don Moore retired from the Vice President position and Ryan Wieber moved into it. I became involved in County Collaboratives. One was the Allegan County Continuum of Care for which I became Co-Chair. This group focused on homelessness and housing needs in the county. From this collaboration, Christian Neighbors began receiving funds from MSHDA (Michigan State Housing Development Authority) earmarked for housing needs. I also became a Salvation Army Deputy which strengthened our relationship with the Kalamazoo Salvation Army.

**2006** - The talk of needing more space for the ministry began! Discussion confirmed a need for four private offices, a larger food pantry, a classroom and 10-15 parking spaces. An exploratory team was charged with looking at what we could consider, and which spaces might be available. This team consisted of Dick Northrop, Carole Hess, and me. Local architect, Jim DeDoes, agreed to draw a plan for a new building. This proposed drawing still hangs in our building on 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Mark Kavanaugh became the Treasurer and Patsy Sinkler resigned from her volunteering for the ministry after serving in various capacities for 22 years. Pastor Foreman stepped down as Chair and Ryan Wieber took on that role. Food distribution was the highest in 2005 and was the highest to date from past years. A new team was formed, the Growth & Development Committee. It was charged with marketing the ministry in the community and attempting to raise funds. Wendy Raymond began building the team. Many great activities began, including a presence at Concerts in the Park and the Otsego Creative Arts Festival. The work and mission of Christian Neighbors continued to grow. The financial request envelopes that began in 2004 grew revenue and new supporters! Hundreds of neighbors continued receiving help.

**2007** – Denny Patzer joined our Board, which began an ongoing plan to have local school superintendents represented on the Board. New fundraisers began at the local grocery stores of Harding’s and Meijer. Several restaurants-initiated fundraisers for us including Pizza Hut and McDonalds. The food pantry continued to feed around 100 families each month and assistance for utilities and rent increased by 25% in 2006. Dick Northrop spoke in favor of beginning a Capital Campaign Committee and the board agreed it was time. Tom Gilmer visited a board meeting as a guest in May, which began his commitment to lead our Capital Campaign Team. This was an amazing turning point for the ministry! The Capital Campaign Team consisted of Tom Gilmer, Betsy Hill, Chuck Kinnane, Donna Doctor, Jan Cushman, Marty Bennett, Nancy Heilig, Ryan Wieber, Sue Cornell, Tim Andrus, Pat Gless, and me. What a great group of people stepping up at the right time in our history to raise all the funds needed for our new building to be built in 2008! We always met at Bob & Jan Cushman’s home at lunch time. Several fundraisers were planned, and personal letters were sent to individuals the team knew to ask for help. There was a benefit, and our first dinner auction was held at First Baptist Church of Otsego. Much progress was made from May through December of 2007. Eugene & Thera Meyers volunteered for Christian Neighbors in the food pantry and were lovely people. They included Christian Neighbors in their will and after their passing, we received \$118,000, all of which was placed in the building fund. To date a plaque in their honor hangs above our food pantry door.

**2008** – Christian Neighbors continued to grow with the support of churches, businesses, and individuals. Many of the churches faithfully held soup suppers with the proceeds going toward the needs of the food pantry. The CROP WALK continued from 1983 to 2011. In 2016, Christian Neighbors sponsored a new walk called the PATH WALK. Service Clubs and small groups became very helpful in meeting our growing financial needs. This year we moved our accounting system to QuickBooks for Nonprofits Edition. Tim Andrus became our new Treasurer when Mark Kavanaugh and his wife moved out of state. In addition to helping neighbors in need, the emphasis of activity in 2008 was to raise all funds needed to pay all building costs in full before the facility opened toward the end of the year. We had two builders submit bids for the building. The Board chose to contract with Bryan Winn. An all-church prayer weekend was held in March and many of our local churches participated by praying for God’s blessings in the building fund efforts. Before our May board meeting, we had secured \$200,000 toward the building fund! God and our community were faithful. Another dinner auction was planned at First Baptist Church. The auctioneer was the Allegan County Jail Chaplain who did a wonderful job. As a result of this dinner, we raised \$13,000 with 200 people in attendance. Refrigerators and freezers were donated by the Otsego Public Schools. Hayworth donated office furniture. Brenton Smith earned his Eagle Scout badge by donating around 80 hours and securing plants and landscaping materials for the new building. Tony Gless became very active maintaining the grounds of our building. Greg York was ready and willing to build the computer infrastructure for our IT needs.

**Moving Dates: With the help of many individuals, we planned our move-in dates to be November 19 & 20. The building was paid in full by November 15, 2008!** The Capitol Campaign Team had accomplished the huge job to which they had committed their efforts. Christian Neighbors was deeply appreciative of this team of amazing folks who took on this mission of faith! The next board meeting was held on February 2, 2009, in the new building.

**God is good!** The mission of Christian Neighbors continues in its original building as well as in the Education Resource Center, completed in 2023.

**Board Presidents from 1999 – 2024**

Pastor Tim Foreman  
Ryan Wieber  
Antoon Brusselmans  
Bruce Haney  
Art Hartman

**Board Secretaries**

Carole Hess  
Diana Gilmer  
Jane Adams

**Treasurers**

Jean Mayrand            Tim Powers  
Nathan Mattson  
Pat Topping  
Tim Andrus  
Dorothy Cool

**Current Board of Directors (2023-2024) are:** Art Hartman (Chair), Edith Rietkerk (Vice Chair), Jane Adams (Secretary), Tim Powers (Treasurer), Aaron Mitchell, Donna Doctor, Jeff Haase, Karen Darby, Larry Hill, Matt Montagne, and Pr. Joe Shaler.

I will always be thankful to three people who reviewed my letters and important papers over the years. They always made me look good. Thank you to Jane Adams, Lynea Hartig, Diana Gilmer.

The amazing staff that I have had the privilege to work with at the time of my retirement in order of their time of service are:

Kim Shafer	Housing/Education Director
Shannon Zabaldo	Housing Specialist
Adam Slinkman	IT Manager
Eric Hoffman	Development Coordinator
Amy VanPutten	Food Program Director
Debbi Woodstock	Food Program Assistant
Ralph Woodstock	Building & Grounds Trustee
Sharon Carper	Demo Kitchen Coordinator/Case Manager

I sincerely welcome the fourth Executive Director of Christian Neighbors, Jennifer Collins, who took the leadership baton from me after my service of thirty years. She has my complete support and prayers for her success in this new role.

I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to meet so many amazing supporters of Christian Neighbors. It has always been a team effort. I will always appreciate the support of my husband, Joe Shaler, as we served our churches and community as a team. Our children and grandchildren are witnesses of our love and support as we all worked together as God called us to serve in His name.

Our children: Chris and Amanda Slinkman, Adam Slinkman, Brandon Slinkman, Phil and Bekah Shaler, Chelsea, and Corey Bush. And our grandchildren: Grace Slinkman, Hannah Slinkman, Bryson Shaler, Maddux Shaler, Baylor Shaler, Parker James Bush.