

Regional InterFaith Association

1976 - 2006

The early years . . .

Discussions began December 6, 1974. A group of twelve West Tennessee pastors and one lay person met to discuss the problem of poverty. As entered in the minutes of that first meeting, "There is a need for additional human services and ministries in rural West Tennessee. The churches could play a greatly increased role in providing services and ministries if a more coordinated, unified effort were undertaken on the part of the churches. There is no church related organization that has the capability to coordinate and initiate needed services and ministries."

Regular meetings were held and the results of a feasibility study were presented at the Oct. 17, 1975 meeting. It was decided to incorporate a separate organization to expand and coordinate the churches' role in creating new services and ministries throughout W. Tennessee. An annual budget of \$30,000 was set and the funds were raised. Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. , Christian Churches of TN, W. TN Synod of the Cumberland Presbetry, and the Tennessee Association of Churches committed to providing start-up funding.

Rev. Eugene Leslie convened the first official meeting of the Regional Inter-faith Association on May 5, 1976. Rev. Gary Scheidt was employed as the first Executive Director. Complimentary office space was provided in Jones Hall at Union University.

The first board, inducted in Nov, 1976, were members from the African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Cumberland Prebyterian, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Presbyterian Church USA, Catholic, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church in U.S. Elected officers were Bob Moore, President, Nehemiah Mitchum, V.P., Carmen Bruer, Secretary, and Eugene Leslie, Treasurer.

Initial programs included the establishment of Food Fairs in church parking lots, now called farmers' markets. Food Stamp Outreach was developed in 20 counties. RIFA conducted workshops on ministry for mentally and physically handicapped, and established college student volunteer projects at five W. Tennessee colleges and universities.

The year ended with funds drained and programs floundering. The Board considered disbanding the organization but instead with renewed determination decided RIFA had a worthwhile mission in West Tennessee and the work should continued.

Funding commitments were secured from: PCUS, UMC, Christian Church in TN, CPC, Episcopal Church, CME, Presbytery of W. TN, Diocese of Memphis, Catholic, AME, Lutheran, Missouri Synod, American Lutheran, Disciples of Christ.

Jackson Ministerial Association drew up guidelines to work with RIFA and provide funding to address needs of local emergencies and transients' needs.

In 1977, RIFA purchased and relocated to 137 Lane Avenue. Senior Chore Service was begun with 14 Chore Aids to serve economically deprived and physically handicapped seniors in 8 W. TN counties. A Hope Line telephone service was provided which served as a central resource point for social services for persons in need. RIFA accepted the responsibility to provide education on the School Breakfast Program; at that time only one metro and one county school system were offering breakfast.

RIFA implemented Jackson's first Food Fair (farmers' market) in June 1978 at the West Jackson Baptist Church parking lot on Tuesdays and Fridays. RIFA organized a self-help group call FACT (Food Action Citizens of Tipton). The first annual Regional Assembly dinner was scheduled and the first newsletter was published in the fall of 1978. In a contract with the TN Housing Development Agency in September 1978, RIFA was to establish housing counseling services in West Tennessee to assist low income families purchase homes under the Equal Housing Opportunity Act. RIFA provided assistance to churches and agencies in West Tennessee in setting up and operating food pantries. Mary Tyler was hired as Chore Service Coordinator which at that time employed 16 aids in six counties. RIFA contracted to provide office space, supplies, telephone, etc. for the Tennessee Commission on Aging's senior employment program. In April RIFA sponsored workshops on Ministry to Corrections in W. TN, a Food and Social Services Workshop, and a conference on W. TN Information and Referral, at which Tennessee First Lady, Honey Alexander was a speaker.

By April 1980, the W. TN Volunteer Outreach project grew from a few fuzzy dreams into a living, functional, and caring reality. WTVO consistently touched the lives of thousands of persons. The Literacy Mission, Hunger in Action (establishing food pantries throughout the region), and the RIFA Hospice program began. December 1980 marked the first time RIFA collected and distributed canned goods for the poor.

Chore Services expanded to include housekeeping, winterizing, painting, and other home repairs with Tommy Tanner and members of local churches, Mother Liberty, First Baptist, and Forrest Heights UMC, providing much of the labor.

Fast forward to 1987: Board Director, Bob Henry; Interim Executive Director Sue Williams; RIFA Homemakers Program - Euva Perry, Director; RIFA Food Depot - David Hallock, Director; Habitat for Humanity - Harry Campbell, Director; Administrative Assistant - Clara Potts. RIFA operated in three locations: Lane Avenue, Scott Street warehouse, and RIFA Food Depot. St. Luke Episcopal Church's Father Peter Magil, First Methodist's Rev. Ken Burnette, Mother Liberty CME's Ron Long and members of RIFA's Board organized to secure a location to provide meals to the poor through downtown churches; the new Soup Kitchen was located at the Salvation Army building, staffed by local churches, and supplied by RIFA Food Depot. The City of Jackson donated a vacant lot on Hunt Street and Habitat began two new houses there. In

the fall of 1987, RIFA began the Debt Counseling Program and Just Desserts. A monthly RIFA/CWU women's prayer breakfast was organized.

In 1988 new RIFA programs were New Eyes for Needy, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, RIFA Aid to Project Help (\$1 added to utility bills to help the poor). RIFA Board of Directors declined an offer by MIFA (Metropolitan Inter-Faith Assn.) of Memphis, to affiliate with them. This decision came after many visits, meetings, and discussions among the two agencies. RIFA Homemaker Program was expanded and became the Senior Network Services which also included ElderHelp and the Senior Companion Volunteer Program. The RIFA Food Bank signed an agreement to become part of the Second Harvest Network. Hospice became part of Jackson Madison County General Hospital's operation as RIFA transferred operating funds to the hospital.

In September, 1988 David Hallock was named interim Administrator. RIFA's "Families First" purchased emergency housing at Church and Orleans for families in crisis. As of December 1989, 52 people had spent nights in the shelter and "there's always a waiting list." The Breast feeding Education Program was established to prevent childhood malnutrition. RIFA Garden Project offered garden space to five families on a Hamilton Drive lot donated by the Hubert Owen Estate and Morse Seed Company furnished the

June 1989, RIFA relocated to new offices at 201 W. Grand Avenue, leased from the City for \$1 annually.

David Hallock was promoted to RIFA Executive Director in 1990. Bill Delastatious became Director of Habitat. The Alzheimer's Respite Care Program and the Mother to Mother Support Group were organized under the direction of Euva Perry.

In 1992, RIFA agreed to operate the Community Soup Kitchen for a one year trial period. That same year, RIFA employed Camille Braly as Bookkeeper. RIFA acquired the Clean Linen property at 219 N. Highland at a price of \$276,000 with grants funding all but \$76,000; with renovation costs projected of \$129,000, Harbert Alexander and Ian McFadden agreed to conduct a capital campaign to raise the funds. RIFA leased space to Southwest Human Resource Agency, Gifts in Kind, Theater Guild, and the Community Soup Kitchen.

Charlie Carrouthers led a committee which organized the Perishable Food Donation program from restaurants to the Soup Kitchen. Habitat International informed RIFA they would like the local Habitat to file for 501c3 status and begin to operate separately in order to comply with its affiliate covenant with Habitat International.

RHEMA Homesless Shelter and Soup Kitchen of Savannah came under the RIFA umbrella early in 1994. RIFA began fiscal 1994 with 11 programs.

In October 1994, it was announced that Executive Director, David Hallock had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's Disease. At a called meeting, President of the Board,

Charlie Crouthers, was named Interim Director. An event was hosted by St. Lukes Episcopal Church to honor David.

To be continued