

# A History of Major Outreach Projects of First United Methodist Church of Kalamazoo

by Kim Taylor, Outreach Major Project Exploration Team

After spending several hours in our church’s archives, one thing becomes very apparent. This is a generous church. It has been a generous church for 184 years. A large part of our generosity stems from our roots as a Wesleyan church. According to www.umc.org, from the very beginning days of Methodism in the mid-1700s, “missional and philanthropic enterprises” were created to promote social change. Our Methodist heritage affirms *“the biblical precept that ‘faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead’* (James 2:17). With these and other tenets at hand, the Methodist Church developed a “connectional” giving system. Each dollar of the local church collection provides for the local church as well as regional, national, and international ministries.

Today, the ministries of the United Methodist Church encompass four areas of focus: Engaging with the Poor, Improving Global Health, Developing Principled Christian Leaders, and Creating New and Renewed Congregations. Two other important ministry areas include Advocating for Justice and Responding to Disaster. Throughout the generous history of First UMC of Kalamazoo, our projects have fit squarely within one or more of these areas.

Early history of outreach projects is not easy to find. Records were lost to time and two fires. Through bits and pieces, a picture of a church establishing itself in its community emerged. After meeting connectional giving obligations, the Church helped its people. Those early times, up until after WW II, were days of building a congregation, responding to a growing congregation, and coping with the fallout of local, national, and international strife. Families torn by war were helped. Civic organizations were supported. Providing food, shelter, and clothing were among the greatest social concerns to which our church responded. This isn’t a lot different as we enter more modern times following World War II.

A snapshot of our church's 1955-56 budget year gives an idea of how a typical budget functioned in the 1950s and '60s. The overall budget for the 1955-56 year was \$68,543. Of the total amount, \$14,430 was benevolent giving. This included money for Wesley Foundation Minister of Students, our Malaysian missionaries,

World Service apportionments, and miscellaneous benevolences. As the church continued to grow, so did these figures.

There have been many large projects taken on by our congregation through the years. We have continued to support Wesley Foundation since its inception in 1923. That has included two building projects. The original building was in 1964 and the most recent was in 2016 (\$50,000). We funded the building of a cottage at Bishop Judith Craig Children’s Village in Liberia in about 2000. The initial cost was approximately \$10,000. In 1988, on Miracle Sunday, the congregation raised over \$80,000 for the purchase and renovation of the Eleanor Street House for women and children. In 2008, First UMC raised \$40,000 for obtaining and renovating what became Robinson House in partnership with Open Doors/Next Door. Additionally, in 2004 we replaced Robin Cabin at Wesley Woods at the cost of \$16,000.

Other projects supported by our Congregation include Open Doors/Next Door, Loaves and Fishes, Promise Tutors at Spring Valley, Food Resource Bank, Appalachian Service Project, Martha’s Table/YANA, You are Warmed by God’s Love Project, Russia Initiative, Justice For Our Neighbors, and Helping Our Neighbors. Over the years, we have also sponsored two refugee families from Vietnam and most recently, a family from Syria. We have also supported countless missionaries in their work both in the United States and overseas.

Of note is that many of the above projects are undertaken with one or more partners. Partners may be individuals, churches, community organizations, or other supporters. Another common aspect is that we don’t have to “own” the material or physical investment. With ministries such as Robin Cabin, Eleanor House, and Robinson House, the physical property is owned and administered by another group. This leaves our church free to continue sponsoring projects as they come along.

This doesn’t begin to cover the scope of outreach at First UMC of Kalamazoo. Instead, it offers a few highlights from 184 years of service. What can we imagine for what could become our largest outreach project to date? We *are* a generous church!

