



A lifeline for Delawareans in need

Connections attends to both the physical and spiritual needs of its clients

BY GARY SOULSMAN • THE NEWS JOURNAL • NOVEMBER 21, 2009

WILMINGTON -- In his tall white chef's hat, the Rev. Aaron Moore watched as turkey, potatoes, and stuffing were carried by volunteers into the dining room of the old West Presbyterian Church at Eighth and Washington streets.

Moore, formerly a professional chef, was in the kitchen overseeing 24 cooked turkeys, 50 pies and [Thanksgiving](#) trimmings for more than 300 -- people who are sometimes forgotten because they struggle with everything from homelessness to HIV/AIDS to schizophrenia.

"Yet they like to be appreciated for who they are, just like you and me," Moore says.

Typically, they've been in psychiatric treatment, rehab centers or prison because they've been unable to manage their lives.

Many, like Thomas McGovern, 57, were thankful for the Thursday meal and grateful that after coffee and pie they would return to homes where they can lead stable lives.

A former businessman, he doesn't know where he would be without **Connections Community Support Inc.** It's a little-known agency that served this week's dinner for some of its more than 7,500 clients.

Connections has helped McGovern find housing in Pike Creek and manage his money and medication. And through Connections he's finding a growing sense of purpose by encouraging others who struggle with addiction.

The [Thanksgiving dinner](#) was the first time the agency has used the former church in this way. It purchased the building for \$1 million from New Castle Presbytery in July, after services for the dwindling congregation were ended in the spring. "I like this building -- it feels good to come here," McGovern says.

"West Church," as the building is sometimes called, is now a drop-in center where Connections clients come to socialize and get medical care and all kinds of practical help. One of 43 sites where Connections has operations, it's also home to a culinary arts program.

The agency also is continuing a West Presbyterian tradition of offering Saturday morning breakfast to the needy. McGovern says Connections has been a lifeline for him, arranging a long-term stay in a rehab that enabled him to stay sober. "I'm where I am today because of Connections," he says.



The Rev. Aaron Moore, director of pastoral services at Connections, was the chef for the agency's recent Thanksgiving dinner for more than 300 people. (The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG)



Audrey Baltimore, 55, was among those who took part in the meal at the old West Presbyterian Church. (The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG)



Dara Smithers, 26, is one of the volunteers Connections depends on. (The News Journal/ROBERT CRAIG)

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(2 of 2)

With a \$23 million annual budget and 500 units of housing around the state, Connections has given stability to people such as McGovern who might otherwise have no place to live.

McGovern once owned an oil [business](#) in the city, but lost it because of a bipolar illness and an addiction to alcohol and drugs he has wrestled with for 20 years. He says he's found medication that controls his illness, and also attends groups that help with the addiction.

"I'm feeling good about where I am and want to give back," says McGovern, who has been sober for 18 months.

He's begun talking with Moore about his spiritual life and his longing to do good.

"That's something I can help people with," Moore says. "Once people have some success I find they'll talk about wanting to reconnect with something higher, maybe a faith they'd left behind."

Many people know Moore as pastor of Manna Christian Fellowship, and a former nursing-home chef. Today, he's also director of pastoral services at Connections. In that capacity, he led a funeral for a deceased client in the former West Presbyterian [sanctuary](#) on Friday.

Moore says it's unusual for a social service agency to hire a pastoral director, but Connections is a nonprofit that seeks to meet the spiritual needs of clients as well as their physical needs.

"I wish more people knew about Connections," he says. "I meet people all the time who have no idea what we do."

So he's spreading the word. He spoke recently to a women's group at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Duncan Road. The women are buying [Christmas](#) presents for 21 people living in a Connections' residence, and they were among the volunteer wait staff at the Thanksgiving dinner.

"The people we've served have been pleasant, friendly and thankful to have us here," says Mary Angerer, one of the volunteers.

Also among the volunteers were two members of Wilmington City Council, Justen Wright and Hanifa Shabazz.

"I find it inspiring to be here," Wright says.

"I think the homeless, mentally ill and the unemployed are people we need to remember this time of year, when we're busy counting up our blessings," says Shabazz.

It's good to remember other people need a [helping hand](#), especially now when the recession has affected so many, she added.

Connections CEO Cathy McKay, 56, helped start the agency as an offshoot of the Church Home Foundation, which later became part of Ingleside Homes, which has retirement housing. She began in 1985, working with hundreds of people transitioning from state psychiatric centers into the community.

Since then the service has grown to include 350 employees.

"Connections is an impressive program, and Cathy McKay lives and breathes that operation," says Fred Sears, executive director of the Delaware Community Foundation.

Connections is one of the biggest Medicaid providers in the state, says McKay, a former English teacher and later the director of CONTACT, a call-in counseling service.

Today, she finds reward in helping vulnerable people find a place of [safety](#). "In many cases these are people who would be on the street without our help," she says.