

Offering Comfort and Community



BY CAROL GRUBER

building community

The Women's Gathering Place (WGP) is a source of comfort and support for women experiencing homelessness in Santa Clara County, California. First Presbyterian Church, in downtown San José, houses WGP. This small church offers a hot lunch and an afternoon of community to women living on the street.



Shelter, Ellen Dreibelbis

Sharon Hare and Eileen Hunter founded WGP in November 2014. Eileen, who is a case worker at a large mental health facility, had noticed that homeless women—often seniors without family—would ride buses in the city to be off the streets and safe. Eileen had heard about Sharon Hare and the Front Door Ministry lunch program at First Presbyterian. Front Door Ministry provides lunches to 150 people a day at the church. Eileen talked with Sharon about the possibility of a drop-in site for homeless women, and The Women's Gathering Place was born.

Volunteers bring in all meals for WGP, usually preparing food for 25 women, although the number varies from day to day. WGP is open on Mondays and Wednesdays. "You don't have to look far to know what God wants you to do," says Sharon, who is the pastor of First Presbyterian. The incidence of homelessness is high in Silicon Valley, where the cost of living is very high.

WGP reflects a collaborative effort on the part of caring women from First Presbyterian Church and the greater San José community. For example, Charlotte Powers, a long-time church member, regularly volunteers at WGP. "I work with the women and try to be a problem solver for them. I'm kind of the grandmother," says Charlotte. "The average age is 50. Things have happened to them, or they've made bad decisions or have addictions."

"We help them find housing and services," explains Sharon. "We have a patio out back; the women go out there, and they talk. Any argument has to stay outside. People are treated with respect. I have the privilege to pray with those who would like to pray with me. We do a prayer for the meal. God sees them as perfect gems. And they are incredibly beautiful."

WGP answers basic needs, like providing access to a clothes washer and

dryer. Toiletries, clothing and feminine hygiene products are distributed, including adult diapers. The diapers are important, because it is dangerous at night for the women to leave their spaces and their few possessions. WGP also provides activities such as crafts and some small services like haircuts and manicures. Some days include entertainment programs.

Funding comes from a variety of sources, including the city, which granted WGP \$10,000, with a match from the county. The Presbytery of San Jose has been very supportive. Presbyterian churches and churches from other denominations also have provided funding and furnished volunteers. And the founding board has recruited support from local women's groups.

"We provide a safe place," Sharon says. "Women can go into the fireside room and sleep for three hours, if rest is what they need. Most of our women are chronically homeless. Every day when we open the doors, our mission is to love unconditionally, in the name of Jesus."

Carol Gruber is a freelance writer, clerk of session at First Presbyterian Church, Union, Missouri, and co-president of Church Women United of Franklin County, Missouri.



Family Album Project

Support WGP with a donation. Give at www.womensgatheringplace.org/donate.html or mail checks (made payable to First Presbyterian Church/WGP) to: Women's Gathering Place, First Presbyterian Church, 49 N. Fourth St., San José, CA 95112.

Karleen Duchscherer (white hat, volunteer coordinator), Eileen Hunter (red hat, co-founder), Pastor Sharon Hare (blue hat, co-founder/director); Charlotte Powers (black hat, boardmember/volunteer extraordinaire).