

Presbytery of Genesee Valley Honored for Support of Cameron Community

On Friday, April 28, Cameron Community celebrated 40 years of serving the vital needs of the Lyell-Otis neighborhood in Rochester with an Anniversary Gala at the German House Auditorium. Over course of the evening, the Presbytery of Genesee Valley was awarded a plaque in thanks for 40 years of support. It's a beautiful plaque and I am going to show it to the people of Gates Presbyterian Church where I currently worship.

As you know, the Presbytery is in the process of closing its physical offices that are located at Gates Presbyterian Church, so there is a practical question about where to hang the plaque. At the conclusion of the evening, the Rev. Michelle Sumption, Moderator of the Presbytery, approached me with the plaque and said that other Presbyterians at the Gala had agreed that the plaque should be given to me!

Why me? Well, it turns out that I probably have one of the earliest relationships with Cameron from the very start back in 1983. The Lyell Avenue Baptist Church on Cameron Street had closed a week before I arrived as the new pastor of Christ and Grace Presbyterian Churches in 1982. Soon after, Baptists and Presbyterians began discussions about what to do with the building—the Baptists not wanting to lose a foothold in a neighborhood with great needs, and the Presbyterians looking for a location to house a new Hispanic congregation. Many of those who were there at the time are no longer alive or have moved far away, so I may be one of the few with memories of what happened in those early days. That's why I was given the plaque! But I think I know just where to put the plaque, so read on!

The project began when Jane Baldwin, a seminary student at CRCDS hired by the Baptists, contacted me about doing a neighborhood needs assessment. In truth, I had a low opinion of the idea, and I told her so—bluntly—because I was serving two churches barely hanging on, on both sides of the proposed Cameron project, and I was thinking that there were just not enough financial resources to support an additional initiative. In the end, though, I became a member of the Cameron Community Ministries Board, and served as chair for about five years, as Cameron Community Ministries got off the ground, moving from the dreaming to the doing.

Never with enough money, but a lot of heart and support from the neighborhood and churches far beyond, Cameron began to grow—daily noon lunches, evening Kids Café, youth programs, employment training, community gardens, a clothing house, and so much more, culminating in the construction of a new building on an adjacent property a few years ago to house a vibrant youth ministry.

My favorite moment at Cameron was when I led a Vacation Bible School class for older youth, almost all of them from the Hispanic congregation. At one point, when I sensed that they were making fun of me in Spanish, I simply said, "I just want you to know that I am fluent in Spanish and I understand everything you are saying." "Prove it!", one of them challenged me. "I don't need to prove it," I said, "you just need to consider that it might be true!" and that was enough to keep the class moving in a positive direction. So, am I fluent? You'll have to test me some Sunday morning to see!

As the years have passed, I have had less involvement with Cameron, mostly because those nearby Presbyterian churches closed, and I went on to serve churches in Genesee County for the next 30 years. But at the Gala there were many from around the Presbytery who were present, proving that those initial efforts 40 years ago continue bear good fruit and attract the involvement of mission-minded Presbyterians.

Now, where to put the plaque? I think it should be hung at Cameron, so that all of our volunteers there can enjoy seeing it!

Rev. Jim Renfrew