



Decatur Cooperative Ministry
Helping families, one family at a time.

DCM Celebrates Its 40th Anniversary (1969 – 2009)

by Nancy Saltmarsh, volunteer and *DCM News* editor

It didn't start with money, a building, or even a name. It started with an invitation from the principal of Clairemont Elementary School, who was alarmed by the growing problem of vandalism in the surrounding neighborhood. From that first meeting of concerned neighbors in the winter of 1969 grew Decatur Cooperative Ministry, now an established "neighbor" itself and a crucial part of the effort to prevent homelessness locally.

Beulah Bullard invited community leaders who were already working on poverty in Decatur to come together in a unified effort to help the poorest of her students. DCM got its start when four large churches sponsored an after-school program at Decatur First Baptist for kids who had nowhere else to go. The vandalism stopped, a board of directors was established and, in 1970, its first director.



Original article from December 1969 Decatur-DeKalb News Era announcing DCM's creation

Mickey Goodson was a board member in the early years and served as director of the afterschool program at First Baptist. He recalls DCM's early role as being a focus for cooperative needs assessment and ministry initiation for the member churches.

"It spun off that initial children's program and continued looking for new community projects to envision and incubate on behalf of the member churches," Mickey says. "Board members at the time took as their major task the work of sharing dreams, planning together to start new initiatives, and involving their respective congregations in the work of community ministry. One of the questions frequently asked at board meetings was about 'who will keep this going' after DCM gets it started. The underlying assumption was that each successful incubator project would be spun off to continue under the care of an interested group of folk, while DCM itself would remain focused on identifying needs, initiating new community ministry models, and involving local congregations in that mission."

Among these early projects were a summer camp for boys at Lake Lanier, a children's dental program, the formation of a Family Task Force, and involvement in many other community task forces (for example, Rape Crisis, Neighborhood Outreach, and Criminal Justice).

One of DCM's earliest and most successful programs, started in 1973, was the Decatur Emergency Assistance Ministry (DEAM), set up to provide food and financial help for rent, utilities, and prescription medications to qualified Decatur residents and homeless people in the area.

"Churches in Decatur had a history of providing food, clothing, other necessities, and Christmas gifts to needy families," says George Hickman, current DCM board member and a longtime volunteer with DEAM. "This pattern of help continued in the community until the early 1970s, when Rev. Norm Coffman of DCM, with the



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Rev. Bob Reno, former executive director, at South DeKalb Community Ministry

help of DCM staffer Carolyn McDowell, took on the job of receiving and screening requests for help, and then providing help through the resources of DCM member churches and other agencies.

”In those early days, DEAM had offices in the old Candler Hotel and at Decatur Presbyterian Church on Sycamore Street. Tish Wallace, an early volunteer, recalls, “We had no food pantry at that time, but we did have meal coupons for a family restaurant across the street from the Candler Hotel, and a limited amount of money. It certainly was an interesting experience working at those two locations; you never knew who was going to walk in!”

In 1977, DEAM became an independent agency and today is supported by 23 member churches and operated out of Holy Trinity Church.

Tish also helped start FISH (Friends in Service Here), a program that provided transportation services for the poor and elderly who needed to get to medical appointments or

to buy groceries. “During the time I served I met a lot of interesting folks, got to know a lot about Grady Hospital, did a lot of praying,” Tish says. In 1982, after DEAM had become an independent agency and FISH was phased out, DCM started the Emergency Shelter Task Force, the beginning of what was to be the main focus of its efforts for the second half of its history: homelessness prevention.

The three programs that have remained as DCM’s central mission are Family Transitional Housing, Hagar’s House, and Project Take Charge.

In 1983, the “Brown House,” owned by North Decatur Presbyterian Church, became the first Family Transitional House, a new idea to help families make the transition from homelessness to stable housing by letting them live rent- and utility-free as they establish jobs and savings. Families are required to attend financial management classes and to put 25% of their income in escrow toward their eventual relocation. A DCM case manager makes frequent contact with the families to ensure that they are on track with employment and savings goals and to offer counseling and support. Today, the program oversees eight houses.

What would eventually become Hagar’s House, DCM’s emergency shelter for women and children, started in the education building of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in 1985. It was open from November through March each year and closed in 1997, when Holy Trinity changed the focus of its homeless ministry. At that point, DCM undertook its first capital campaign, eventually raising \$1 million for the purchase and renovation of its current Church Street building for Hagar’s House and its administrative offices. That facility, utilitarian as it is, was a step up for the staff, who until then had moved offices frequently with changing circumstances.

Jackie Jenkins, executive director of DCM from 1991 to 2001, remembers four addresses during her tenure—starting with two rooms in the cellar of the chapel building of Decatur First United Methodist Church.



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“The bathroom was tiny, cold-water-only, and frequently had backed-up plumbing,” Jackie says. “But the worst part was that every time it rained, the two rooms flooded and we had to simply shut down and go home! My gift from my predecessor, Bob Reno, was a Wet Vac, and it was used frequently.”

The capital campaign was completed in two years, Jackie says, “thanks to Debbie Bowling, whom we hired on a contract basis as a fundraising consultant, and thanks to board members who were not afraid to walk out into the unknowns. “We countered every setback and every ‘no’ with a success and with a ‘yes’ in our fundraising.”

DCM clients in any of the three programs can use the Expanding Horizons Technology Center, established in 2002 at the Church Street building, to look for jobs or housing. Chris Martin helps them one evening a week, using his design skills to help clients create resumes and cover letters. “I basically help women with a task that they could do independently, i.e., build a resume, but add some elements to increase the likelihood that their resume will stand out in a batch of 50 or 100 resumes,” he says. “After the resume work, I help with a job search. I can sometimes manage to help one individual with 10 job apps in an hour. I think this is practical because it gives each person more exposure, which is critical in this economy.”

Project Take Charge got its start in 1990 as the South DeKalb Community Ministry Center, a day shelter for homeless men and an emergency assistance program located in the old Panthersville Presbyterian Church’s manse. The center eventually dropped the day shelter component of its program and relocated to its present space at Belvedere United Methodist Church. In 1997, it was renamed Project Take Charge to better express its focus on prevention, and mandatory financial management classes were added to the emergency assistance component. Today, Project Take Charge works to prevent homelessness by paying rent or utilities for people who are in eminent danger of eviction.



Rev. Nicolene Durham, former shelter manager, talks with Rosalyn Carter during her visit to the shelter.



Dr. Charcella Green, 1998 board chair, and Rev. Jackie Jenkins, former executive director, present a check for the purchase of the Church Street building.

DCM was never solely about assistance for people in crisis, however. Underlying every effort is the support of its 38 member congregations and the ecumenical nature of their work. DCM sponsors several community services every year, a tradition that started with a Good Friday service in 1972. Students from the Candler Contextual Theology Program began working with DCM in 1989. Congregations have supplied volunteers, facilities, and of course, money.

The focus of its work has shifted over the years, programs have come and gone, and the staff has grown to reflect DCM’s changing needs. The one constant has been poverty



in Decatur. In a weak economy, the need is greater than ever—but so is the hope.

“Despite the immense need and the nature of the challenges that must be overcome, families can and do find their way to stability and happiness,” says Beth Vann, executive director of DCM. “This month, a mother with four girls, who first had a relationship with DCM as a guest at Hagar’s House and then as a resident of Family Transitional Housing, will move her family into a townhouse in DeKalb. A mother of four boys who is a past participant of the Family House program will join our board of directors. A person with a visual impairment who came to Project Take Charge for financial assistance is also getting a new pair of glasses thanks to the staff and volunteers going the extra mile to connect them with other programs.

“Safe, permanent housing is the foundation on which families build stability and community. To get that foundation, some families need many months of supportive, interim housing. Others need short-term financial assistance and a new pair of glasses. Helping families build their own foundation is the work that we are to be about, and with the continued support of our many partners in ministry, we’ll be able to do this work for many years to come.”