

Frankford Group Ministry Agency History



Early History:

Frankford Group Ministry (FGM) has been located in one of the original four congregational buildings since 1983, where it moved from another church building that housed it since its inception in 1979. The original impetus for the collaborative effort was both to reach out to the children in the neighborhood (through Sunday School and summer camp, and after school type activities run by volunteers) and also to be a positive force for facilitating peace and connectedness in the community when the racial composition of the neighborhood began to change rapidly in the 60s and 70s. In 2007, the annual report stated the mission as:

“We work with our neighbors and partners to empower the people of Frankford by building stronger families and a stronger community. ... Since 1979 FGM has remained a beacon of hope. Empowerment in action means working together to create a viable community of faith and a vital community of hope.”

FGM was started through a collaborative effort of four congregations, spearheaded by Pastor Elaine Barnes. The next executive director moved the organization beyond offering children’s programming to getting public grants and hiring paid staff.

Current Situation:

After more than 30 decades of service to its community, FGM closed down in 2009. The area continues to recover slowly from decades of economic downturn and white flight; it boasts multiple ethnic groups, from African American to Latino to Asian as well as white. Frankford Group Ministry was multifaceted in its programs. Before closing it still offered the following programs and served the following numbers of individuals or families in 2007

- Neighborhood Parenting Program (170 families, 200 children).
- Frankford Beacon Center (72 enrolled students, 91 summer enrollments, 224 youth served).

- Northeast Youth Curfew Center (209 youth served).
- Services to Children in their Own Homes (SCOH) (69 families served over a year).
- Emergency Assistance (1203 Low Income Heating applications, 1117 Crisis grant applications, 57 individuals received cash assistance from FGM for utilities; 8421 individuals used clothing, 14,476 units of food (2 days' worth) given out; 439 tax returns prepared, 286 people worked on life skills, and 27 seniors were served meals in their homes).
- Community Christmas (456 individuals served).
- Easter Baskets (81 baskets to families).
- Thanksgiving Baskets (121 families).
- School Supplies (60 back packs with supplies to students).
- Public, community meetings (130 in a year).

In total, in 2007, these figures indicate that FGM had 13,303 interactions and services provided to individuals and their families. This figure might include persons who received more than one service from FGM, but also undercounts individuals served through family-supports such as help with paying for utilities and for food.

In 2007, the organization had about 8 paid staff, and used 200 volunteers who donated 6,000 hours, and brought together individuals from congregations, parole systems, the neighborhood, VISTA volunteers, and college students to serve one another. Over time, the original four congregations continued to provide oversight through monthly board meetings with the executive director. The pastors and some congregation members, as well as two "at large" community members made up the board.

FGM's ministries are not explicitly or methodically "Methodist", however, the executive director was appointed by the regional conference – Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church and was an ordained pastor. The outgoing Executive Director was the first who did not have a simultaneous appointment as pastor of a congregation. One other director – of Emergency Assistance - was also a licensed United Methodist pastor. The organization did not require staff to sign any statement of faith.

In 2005, two of the original four congregations were closed by the denomination. FGM was housed in the former Central United Methodist Church. The remaining two congregations are

small, have many older members, and are not strong financially. Two new, local congregations have been invited to serve on the board. The Director of the Emergency Assistance program started a small new congregation which began meeting weekly in 2006 in the FGM building. The Conference does not recognize this as a congregation.

Because FGM sought outside funding under the direction of every executive director except its first, it grew somewhat independently of the founding congregations, but until fairly recently, had a lot more overlap with congregation members who volunteered on a regular basis. Now, as the founding members get older (in their 70s and 80s), the volunteer pool has become from more diverse sources, including the community, school groups, corporate groups, church members, seniors, individuals with court-ordered community service, or volunteer interns.

FGM functioned rather independently, in terms of day to day decision making and administration, of its founding community. For the last 10 to 15 years of its life, Central UMC – the congregation, “worshipped in the FGM building,” rather than the other way around. There was a recent effort to revitalize a meaningful relationship with the congregations, provide opportunities for members to serve, and yet getting more and different people on the board who can bring new skills and networks to the organization for financial and other reasons.

Relationship between faith community and agency:

This organization was very successful in providing services, even though they struggled to stay afloat, financially for many years. The members of the board appeared to have a very cordial and supportive relationship with the executive director, but in the executive director’s estimate, she was lacking skilled support from the board – it was a weak board and the oversight seems to be more of a rubber stamp. The current executive director tried to get the board to be more engaged, but she doesn’t believe that will change until she can recruit people with a wider set of skills – to help fundraise, in particular. The pool of people who are interested are not likely to have financial or other professional skills.

In this way FGM was quite typical of many other small to mid-sized nonprofits in terms of having a weak board structure. Congregation members gradually relinquished the day-to-day control of the organization to the executive director through the 80s and 90s. The way programs were provided was not viewed as being explicitly Methodist by member volunteers, but the

congregations supported outreach to the community and the volunteer members' commitment echoes, and I think, provided an outlet for a very typical Methodist commitment to service in the wider community.



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University of Maryland, Department of Anthropology, 1111 Woods Hall, College Park, MD 20742

Phone: 301.405.7121 Email: faithandorganizations@anth.umd.edu