

HISTORY

Not long after the arrival of the Franciscan fathers in June of 1955, the first St. Mary's Dining Room opened its doors to the hundreds of unemployed, homeless (mostly men) and unemployable poor people of San Joaquin County. The parish house had had an endless stream of hungry people coming to its door. Unable to cope with the need the Fathers found an abandoned tavern, at the corner of Washington Street and Hunter Avenue that became the first St. Mary's Dining Room in October of 1955. The initial staff was clients who, in exchange for room and board, cooked the meals and maintained the dining room. As the knowledge of the dining room spread; more church-related volunteers began to assist in the operation and service of the poor, hungry people who came for a hot meal.

In 1963 redevelopment changed the face of Washington Street. The gold rush buildings were torn down and the Chinese Center replaced them. The Dining Room was without a home. Then a warehouse in Boggs Tract was offered free of rent by a contractor. With the additional space Dr. Virgil Gianelli was able to start a part time clinic and community volunteers provided a clothing distribution room.

Five years later the warehouse was in the path of the new construction for I-5. The Dining Room lost its second home. With no money and a one-year permit it was moved into the "temporary quarters" in the social hall of St. Mary's Church. For the next eighteen years the hall and the gymnasium would provide food and sometimes shelter for a growing population of single men and women and a now increasing number of families.

Dr. Gianelli, became concerned about the difficulties the Dining Room faced. The Board no longer functioned and the inadequate and crowded dining room was in danger of closing. He recruited a new interfaith board and the plans began for the building of an adequate center on Cal-Trans property that would be leased by the City of Stockton. The permit was for only four years, which limited the construction to portable buildings. (The lease today is a 30-year renewable lease.)

The new structure located on Sonora and Harrison Streets consisted of a dining room, the clothing center with showers and a barber, the medical clinic with a single dental chair and offices for the County Department of Mental Health. Volunteers like Ross Bewley started the dental clinic; Paul Fairbrook developed plans and equipment for the kitchen; and Dr. Gianelli organized the medical clinic. Later Tom Dosh helped secure two trailers that eventually became the office and the first classroom for the TLC school. Richard Giambruno, a pharmacist started the St. Mary's dispensary. Later the Dominican Sisters of San Raphael provided funds to build the dental clinic.

In 1991, with a bequest from the Frank Saramento estate, the Women's and Children's Center was built. The following year Sara Garfield, aware of the homeless children not attending school, started the Transitional Learning Center(TLC). Adult programs such as AA, pre-employment training, counseling and English as a Second Language were added to meet the urgent needs.

In 1996, the gift of a large parcel of adjacent land by Frank and Irene Garavano provided the space for a badly needed enlarged dining room and medical clinic. With funding from the City, County, and foundations and private sources the new buildings were dedicated in June of 2000. The old dining room has become the main office and meeting rooms and the vacated office has become an annex of the expanded dental clinic and for the Pre-Employment Program.

During the year 2004 the Kara Brewer Family Clothing and Hygiene Center was constructed on an additional piece of property also donated by the Garavano Family. This permanent structure replaced existing portable structures with a more adequate facility to accommodate the growing needs of our community's homeless persons. Here the first step to restoring one's personal dignity can begin with a hot shower and clean clothing.

St. Mary's Interfaith Dining Room officially changed its operating name in 2005 to St. Mary's Interfaith Community Services to be more reflective of all that the agency does in the community. This was also the year in which our first 50 years of caring service was celebrated.

2006 saw the addition of our county's first Homeless Court. Once each month our Board Room is converted to a court room allowing our clients the opportunity to take care of legal issues. This program is a collaborative that includes the Superior Court, the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the City of Stockton, other homeless service providers and the University of the Pacific.

2007 continued to be another year of growth for the organization. The increasing cost of living coupled with low paying employment opportunities ensured that a greater number of individuals and families came seeking assistance. In January of this year the Pre-Employment Workshop returned to our campus providing our clients with the support they require to face the additional barriers to employment they deal with. This is a collaborative with Goodwill Industries of San Joaquin Valley. A Head Start Pre-School program opened on our campus in September providing early education opportunities for children ages 3-5. In the fall of 2007 a hot breakfast program was begun in our dining room providing our clients with a nutritious start to their day.

The creation and development of the growth of St. Mary's Interfaith has been due to the generosity and kindness of the community. The uniqueness and success of St. Mary's Interfaith has been not only the financial assistance but also hundreds of volunteers, Board Members, and a dedicated staff that has made St. Mary's Interfaith a welcoming center for those who suffer the indignity of poverty.

The future of St. Mary's Interfaith is predicated on the continuing financial support of the community and the many volunteers who enable us to continue to serve the poor people of our community.