Back Bay Mission
Established in 1922

BACK BAY MISSION
strengthening neighborhoods, seeking justice, transforming lives

THE CHANGING TIDES

The Magazine of Back Bay Mission

Spring 2022

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Reflections STORY

Executive Director
Pastor James Pennington

"Peace begins with a smile."
—Mother Teresa

What a simplistic way to facilitate peace! I love Mother Teresa because I can identify with her and what we know of her life since her passing. We can see ourselves in her.

When Mother Teresa told us in 1984 she was not a saint, I did not think she was being modest. I loved her. I was in awe of her. She was humble in a religious sense. I had several opportunities to hear her speak and one opportunity to participate in a small group experience with her facilitating. From a personal point of view with limited experience with Mother Teresa, I would call her shrewd, strong, cranky, even funny - not modest.

When you read some of her letters or read her recent book "Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light", she sounds more like a rejected lover. For millions, Mother Teresa, in her homespun cotton sari seemed more the word of God made flesh than any pope in golden finery. And if you found your calling among the dying and destitute of Calcutta (now Kolkata), it would be hard to hold frail, starving children in your arms and not ask, even shout, where is God in all of this?

As a spiritual director, a pastor, a humanitarian and a global citizen, that is exactly the question I ask directees and myself in the face of what I see every day at Back Bay Mission. Where is God? Kenney Washington, our Director of Client Services, always reminds the staff that working with the unsheltered and poor is exhausting, depleting work and it is critical that each staff person makes sure to be intentional with self-care. It can, at times, be a toxic environment because everyone we serve has multiple critical needs and we often have limited resources.

Many of us on staff find peace, hope, and the strength to go on through mission campers who come from various locations across our country. They bring an open heart ready for new awarenesses and are willing to be the hands and feet of Jesus on our Biloxi soil.

We also find peace and hope in the many "thank you mam/sir" and "bless your heart" from Micah Day Center guests, those we serve through our client choice food pantry, Emergency Solutions Case Management and Emergency Assistance Program. Peace and hope are found in the tearful thank you from the owners of the homes that our many volunteers replace shingles and siding onto their homes, so it no longer leaks and is more sustainable for the future.

Hope and peace is found in the Micah Day Center guest who stated to Daniel, our Day Center Coordinator, "I really don't look forward to the weekend when you are closed, but always look forward to Monday mornings when I can come back to find a place to feel cared for."

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote powerfully about the experience of looking into another person's face and finding there the presence of the Divine.

When we question the presence of the Divine in the tough times, we can find God in both the faces of those who serve at Back Bay Mission and the faces of those we serve. And personally, as the Executive Director, I find the presence of the Divine in the faces and work of each member of the Back Bay Mission team.

May you, dear reader, be the human face of the Divine and offer peace, hope, and strength to others. Especially remember those in your "neck of woods" who are unsheltered or living in poverty, give them a smile and acknowledge your joint humanity. It will make a difference!

Executive Director

Pastor James Pennington

find us online

100 YEARS OF HISTORY!

Back Bay Mission (BBM) turns 100! Not many organizations have achieved this milestone. This accomplishment is because of so many of those who took the reins to promote change and to help others. There have been numerous directors, staff members, donors, and volunteers that have given so much to Back Bay Mission. It is on their shoulders that we are still inspiring change in 2022.

From BBM's start of serving the children of the seafood industry in the 1920's, taking a bigger role in trying to end segregation in the 1960's, working on access to health care for all in the 1970's, to serving the low-income and unsheltered today. If you have been a part of Back Bay Mission in the last 100 years in any capacity give yourself a pat on the back and a high-five. BBM could not be celebrating this milestone without your vision, commitment, time, and donations!!!

Back Bay Mission's work is not done. We are still fighting injustices, unfortunately some of the same injustices that we have fought in the past. We are still working towards love and equality for all. Thank you for joining with us as we commit to continue to serve those who are in need for the next 100 years.

THE 100 YEAR GOLDEN LOGO

Back Bay Mission's logo has turned Gold, as we commemorate 100 years of serving the Gulf Coast! In those 100 years we have shared love, compassion, and advocacy for the most marginalized on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We also celebrate you; our donors and volunteers who have supported BBM over the last 100 years financially, boots on the ground, and through prayer. This 100-year celebration would not be possible without you.

We are excited to announce that we are kicking off a Capital Campaign in celebration of this centennial milestone. Back Bay Mission must continue doing the work of strengthening neighborhoods, seeking justice, and transforming lives. Our Capital Campaign will help us in deepening the breadth and width of our impact on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and throughout our great country.

The Capital Campaign will allow us to expand services, build transitional housing, enhance our sustainability, and add essential staff to fill gaps in service. We will be sharing more information on the 100 Year Capital Campaign soon! Stay tuned for informational events that will be happening on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, around the United States, and through the internet! We will make announcements through our dedicated Capital Campaign webpage and through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and targeted emails. You will be able to access our dedicated Capital Campaign webpage through our website at www.thebackbaymission.org. Join us as we continue - Making Good Trouble on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for 100 Years!!!!

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EARLY HISTORY

Back Bay Mission has a proud history of service on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In this issue of The Changing Tides, you will see some of our history from the 1920's to the 1950's. The next issue will highlight the 1960's to the 1990's. The final issue for 2022 will highlight from 2000's to present.

1920s

First Evangelical provides Sunday School education, clothing, shoes, and medicine to the children of the Back Bay fisher folk. By 1925, First Evangelical is also offering classes in sewing, embroidery, craft work, and cooking. In 1926, it opens two chapels (one at Back Bay Blvd. and Oak St., the other at Chartres St. and Fayard St.). Services are held on Sunday and Tuesday. Sunday School is still held at First Evangelical, in part "to overcome the class consciousness which hitherto formed an undesirable social cleavage between the people of two communities." In 1929, a clinic is added to the Chartres Street Chapel.

1922

Rev. George M.L. Hoffman and Mrs. Louise A. McDonnell of the First Evangelical Church in Biloxi (a congregation of the Evangelical Synod of North America, a predecessor denomination to the United Church of Christ) begins outreach to the 'fisher folk' of the Back Bay. At the time, 'missions' was a term primarily used to describe the founding of new congregations. The new mission quickly broadened that understanding.

1930s

First Evangelical is making four trips each Sunday to bring about 100 children from the Back Bay to Sunday School. Mrs. McDonnell rides on the bus's running board. The Evangelical Synod of North America merges with the Reformed Church in the United States to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

1940s

A clinic is opened at the Oak Street Chapel. Staff includes two physicians, a dentist, and a technician. In response to the establishment of Keesler Field, First Evangelical establishes a Soldier's Entertainment Fund and hosts Open Houses for Service Personnel twice a week. A Back Bay church is created as a separate organization from First Evangelical Church.

1948

By this time, the Mission includes a congregation, two Sunday School classes every Sunday morning, two church services every Sunday evening, various weekday activities for adults and children, a clinic under the direction of Mrs. McDonnell, and a clothing center and food pantry.

1950s

The Oak Street location is closed, and all activities are moved to the Chartres Street location. By the end of the decade, a Back Bay
Administrative Board is formed, a craft shop for boys is opened, St. Paul's Back Bay Church is organized at Chartres Street (1956), a weekday nursery school and kindergarten are opened (1958), Teen Town is created (rolls increase from 25 to 600 in the first year, 1959), and St. Paul's Credit Union is opened (1959).

1956

Biloxi Evangelical Church is severely damaged in a fire and the congregation moves to a new building on E. Howard Ave.

1957

The United Church of Christ is formed when the Evangelical and Reformed Church merges with the Congregational Christian Churches. A bell tower is erected at Chartres Street to commemorate Mrs. MacDonnell's years of service. She retires in 1958.

1959

The first issue of The Changing Tides was published on June 18

CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

It has been two years since Back Bay Mission has held a Creative Expressions Class due to extreme caution for our guests and staff. Now that Mississippi, at this time, is considered low-risk for the spread of COVID-19, the decision was made to offer the Creative Expressions Class once again. Art can be a refuge from intense emotions, help one process life events, relieve stress, and can positively impact mental health. This program has been missed in the Micah Day Center.

Micah Day Center Case Manager (Kirsten) and two volunteers from St. Paul's United Church of Christ in St. Marys, Ohio (Amy and Billie) held a Creative Expressions painting session for our Micah Day Center guests. The guests were able to express themselves through a choice of a blank canvas or a spring inspired pre-drawn canvas. The spring canvas choices were cute bunnies or beautiful flower scenes.

Several guests came into paint during Creative Expressions. They enjoyed getting lost in their paintings. One of the guests chose to create a red line painting for firefighters he knew and were lost during 911. Another guest chose to make an abstract painting. Several other guests choose to paint in their own flair a flower scene or a bunny. During this time one of the new guests to Back Bay Mission asked if this is something that we offer often. Kirsten was able to let him know that she is planning on holding a Creative Expressions Class once a month. He was very happy for the chance to express himself through art. He said, "I am lucky to have come today. I hope I get to do this again." Kirsten and the volunteers were able to have many conversations with the guests as they took to their canvases. It was a day to help start some of the healing of the unknown our guests experience every day. It turned out to be a great day for the volunteers and staff as they got to know each of the artists that came through the door.

THANK YOU FOR CARING

Back Bay Mission is here for many that are in great need. There are many ways people reach out to Back Bay Mission for help. Many come in person, some call, and then we have those who email with their last cry for help. In this case it was an email written to Back Bay Mission's Home At Last Case Manager, Sarah. A lady we will call "T," stated that because of domestic violence and stalking she was homeless with children. Sarah immediately responded asking her to come into Back Bay Mission which she first refused. Sarah gave her many resources to contact but she knew she needed to keep in contact with her and convince her to come to Back Bay Mission for help. Through a weekend of constant contact and communication she was willing to come in. "T" was fearful and full of trepidation, many mothers (families with children) experiencing homelessness are afraid to ask for help of fear of losing their children because of a lack of housing while escaping from a dangerous situation. Finally, after constant reassurance, "T" came to Back Bay Mission. Sarah remembers when she walked in the door. She was scared but Sarah greeted her with love and caring. She said to her, "Hi, 'T' I am really glad you're here!" From there she met with our intern from Tulane to start her needs assessment. When she left that afternoon, Sarah received this email: "Hi its "T" you guys are awesome my kids and I have so much faith now I have been smiling since I've left thank you for caring…to know me by my name made my day meaning you actually care…." Sarah and "T" continue to stay in touch and are working on helping her find housing, provide her with the necessary documentation she will need, employment, and even financial assistance for deposits. Taking the time to communicate in a caring manner whether it is saying their name, answering an email, or giving hugs are all important parts of managing a crisis and giving a person what "T" said was faith.

WORKING AT BACK BAY MISSION IN THE 1960'S

BY PHYLLIS (VIALL OR MISS PHYLLIS AS THE CHILDREN CALLED ME)

I worked for one year, 1964-1965, at the mission as a volunteer for The Board for Homeland Ministries. I lived in The Manse, taught kindergarten, led two youth groups, tutored school-age children and paid many home visits helping families participate in mission related services. I was fresh out of college and wanted to "serve a cause" before I went into elementary teaching! Oh, I have to say that I traveled from place to place in an old Volkswagen Bus that had once had the mission sign on the side until it was decided that it was safer to paint over it!

My decision to ultimately work at the mission was suggested by the then UMASS Protestant chaplain who became my husband ten years later. Eventually Hal (Rev. Dr. Harold F. Cooper) served as pastor of The West Yarmouth Congregational Church UCC in MA where he served for 19 years and I taught elementary school. He passed away from pancreatic cancer in 2012. I remain at The West Yarmouth church which has honored his memory by naming a completely renovated wing after him, "The Cooper Parish Center." During a cross country trip in 2003 I wanted Hal to visit the mission. We were so warmly welcomed to its new spot and spent a couple of hours talking with personnel and looking at photos and scrapbooks.

During this important time for civil rights Rev. John Aregood and his wife, Joy were our leaders. They were loving, compassionate people and so wonderful to me through some very tough and scary times. At this time the mission was "technically" integrated but truly not accepted as such by many local citizens including some local law enforcement persons.

At that time the mission stood where there is presently a casino. Across the street was a small general store. I didn't learn until later that the proprietor was a member of the KKK! He always called me, and probably all women, "honey." Needless to say, when I discovered his affiliation I went elsewhere for my errands!

The manse was located just behind the mission. There was a dead end dirt road that passed by the mission. At the end of this "road" was a metal hut which apparently had access to electricity as I could see a bare electric bulb hanging from the ceiling. In this hut lived one man with hooks replacing his hands. I never did find out what happened to his hands. Twice a day everyday he would go to the little store and return with a small paper bag. I've no idea what was in it. On more than one occasion he would come to my door, bang on it and spew out angry threats and phrases such as n-r l-r etc. As an "I'm going to help save the world" 22 year old, I was petrified!

My kindergarten class was made up mostly of children from the Keesler Air Force base, all white, others were children from the immediate area. There were no brown or black students.

Our thoughts at the time were non-white families were still fearful of sending their children. Also at this time there were no public kindergartens in Mississippi.

I had two youth groups. The youth who came to the mission were local white youth. We had a basketball area outdoors, a ping pong table indoors along with a small library, art supplies and a comfortable area to meet and lounge. Nearby was a pond for swimming. At first I went into the black neighborhood with permission from the minister of their local church and met the youth there. Our meeting area was in a dingy basement. Whatever activities I wanted to provide I had to bring in the needed materials. I soon got very tired of the unfairness of this set up. I asked John's permission to pick up the youth and transport them to the mission with all its amenities and to combine both groups. He was a little wary at first but became very supportive. This plan, of course, was contingent upon permission from their pastor and their parents. A few initially held back. I was never alone with the youth. I always had several adults helping. Initially I received some threatening phone calls, "or else" calls. I never knew who called. There were never any actual physical threats against anyone and eventually the calls stopped. Thinking back on this now it seems unreal. But again, with the hate crimes so rampant in our country today, not so unreal.

I am finding myself with so many memories of that year. Briefly, going into my kitchen early one morning to see two men in white hoods crouching outside my back door. When they saw me they left. I thought all my windows were locked and nailed shut but I returned one day to find my radio and several other items missing. We had forgotten to secure the window that held the air conditioner! Getting ready to fly home for the Christmas holidays Rev. Aregood appeared to inspect my closets fearing I would pack everything and not return! Of course I did return!

I was asked to return the following year but decided to return to MA to teach. It actually was a difficult decision. This truly was a life-changing year for me. To this day I am so grateful I had this opportunity. I am thrilled to learn about all the mission is doing, how much your services have grown. May you grow even more over the next 100 years!!

There are even more experiences I could relate, but you have the idea! In closing I have to say this. Back in the 60's with the passing of the Civil Rights Bill I felt our country was on the way to a healthy, fair and diverse nation. Today, I am in shock seeing the intolerance, lack of even being open to differences of opinion and the number of hate crimes. I am truly fearful of where we are headed and of what our democracy is becoming. SO, please don't give up. More than ever we are in need of services and role models provided by places such as Back Bay Mission.

MUSING OF GASTON POINT

By Everett Lewis, GCHI Executive Director

I've found myself spending a lot of time in Gaston Point these days. I even started attending and supporting the local Baptist Church there. I don't attend every Sunday but often. I enjoy that there is something very familiar about it all, the order of service, the hymns and inspirational songs, the message a combination of milk and meat. See I grew up in a small, rural but powerful Baptist church, so it provides a feel of home to me. If you haven't guessed by now Little Rock is a predominantly Black Baptist church nestled in the middle of a predominantly Black community known as Gaston Point.

Gaston Point sits at the farthest western edge of the City of Gulfport and abuts the boundary line of the City of Long Beach. Its population of approximately 2,363 is housed in just over 600 single family houses and a total of just over 1200 households. Over 95% of its residents are Black. The southern boundary of the community is the CSX "railroad tracks" the eastern boundary is Broad Avenue which is fronted on the east side of Broad by Memorial Hospital at Gulfport and to the north by the US Naval Construction Battalion Gulfport.

Gaston Point has been a place of interest for Gulf Coast Housing Initiative (GCHI) and Back Bay Mission for several years. That interest was birthed into action in the fall of 2020 when the two organizations were gifted cash and real property assets to be used in the Gaston Point community. In November 2020 GCHI purchased a foreclosed property in the community which was totally rehabbed by Back Bay Mission and sold to a low-moderate income buyer with previous ties to the community. GCHI conducted interviews with long standing members of the community and through those conversations established a focus group of six individuals from the community along with the Executive Directors of GCHI and Back Bay Mission. The group call themselves the Gaston Point Stakeholders. The Stakeholders held their first meeting in June 2021 and meets monthly at the Little Rock Baptist Church Fellowship Hall. The group partnered with Lead Free Mississippi to conduct a community survey and is working to address two key issues in the community, blighted properties, and heirship protection.

Stay tuned for more information on the survey results and updates on the Stakeholders work. Be sure to come back to the Summer Issue of The Changing Tides.

VOLUNTEER CORNER

OUR BACK BAY MISSION VISITS

By Mark & Bonnie Westcott, Volunteers,

Mark and Bonnie Westcott, Volunteers

I've been coming to Back Bay Mission for eight years and Bonnie has joined me the last six years. My first two years were with a UCC Church group from Highland, Illinois. The last six years we have been joining other churches for our weekly mission trip.

The week we work for BBM is very rewarding for us. We always tell people that we leave with more than we give because working here changes you as you help people fix their homes. And the friends we have made over the years are very special to us. Because we have worked with so many different churches, our friend base has grown from many places in the United States.

These last four years we've been coming in mid-January for our mission trip and then we rent a condo and stay for six weeks and volunteer around the Gulf Coast. We volunteer at Loaves and Fishes on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. We serve the homeless breakfast and lunch. On Thursdays we volunteer at Feed My Sheep which is an outreach mission of First United Methodist Church of Gulfport. This is our home church while we are here on the coast.

When we aren't volunteering, we take day trips around the area. We've been to Gulf Shores, Alabama and Pensacola, Florida, and Laurel, Mississippi plus up and down the coast around the Biloxi area. We love our time here and look forward to our trip every year; we have already booked our trip for 2023.

This year is a special year for Back Bay Mission, because they are celebrating the 100th anniversary that BBM started on the coast. The faces have changed and the work changes all of the time but BBM has survived. Most of the time BBM works on lower income houses, and sometimes they've worked on recovery helping people after hurricanes that have hit the coast.

We have found it so rewarding to be a part of the first 100 years, and excited to be a part of the next 100 years!

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100 YEARS — SINCE 1922

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