

Holy Comforter Church Report to Annual Council 2013

Holy Comforter is a community in which marginalized people are central to parish life. About 60 percent of our members live with mental illness or other conditions that hinder full acceptance by society. Most are also very poor, living on a small disability check and residing in personal-care homes in south Atlanta.

Holy Comforter not only welcomes these sisters and brothers into the parish as full and equal members but also provides recovery programming and life supports through the Friendship Center, a safe, loving and inclusive community that promotes the mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing of adults marginalized by poverty and mental health issues and of those who come here to volunteer, work, and learn.



Matthew Collins, recently promoted to Executive Director of the Friendship Center at Holy Comforter

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the Friendship Center serves about 75-85 people with structured activities, yoga, vision and vaccination clinics, group interaction, worship, hot meals (over 300 per week), a clothes closet, and other assistance. Activities include woodworking, ceramics, games, painting, weaving, music, knitting, and gardening. Because of space constraints on our campus, our art studios are located at the Woodland Hills Baptist Church, several blocks away. One of our critical needs is for facilities on or adjacent to our campus for our art studios.

Our programs are focused on recovery. Mental health recovery does not depend on a cure, although with appropriate therapies many people with a mental illness can return to a level of functioning equal or near that experienced prior to the onset of the illness. Recovery has been described in four stages. The first is *hope*, “a sense that things can and will get better.” Belief in the possibility of recovery is the essential first step to recovery. The second is *empowerment*: “To move forward people need to have a sense of their own capability and their own power.” The third is *self-responsibility*: “As people with mental illness move toward recovery, they realize they have to take responsibility for their own lives.” The fourth is *a meaningful role in life*. Recovery demands that people “achieve some meaningful role in their lives that is separate from their illness.” This meaningful role is not the role of victim or survivor, both of which relate to the person’s mental illness: “It is important for people to join the larger community and interact with people who are unrelated to their mental illness.”¹ Our focus on recovery is evident in our commitment to including on our staff and among our many volunteers Certified Peer Specialists, experts in helping others with recovery. Currently, we have at least five serving in our community.

Because Holy Comforter is a small parish comprised mostly of people who are poor and sick, we cannot produce the funds necessary to support the parish and the Friendship Center from within the community. In addition to parish pledges, our financial support comes from individuals, parishes, and foundations. The Diocese provides approximately \$40,000 per year in operating funds for the Friendship Center and also employs the Vicar. In 2012, the combined operating expenses of the parish and the Friendship Center were \$386,000, of which \$284,000 were attributable to the Friendship Center. These expenses were supported by net new operating revenues of \$372,000, which included about \$68,000 in parish collections, \$62,000 from other parishes, \$185,000 in gifts designated for the Friendship Center by individuals, foundations, and other organizations. Our shortfall was covered out of reserve funds. Over the last two years, we have made a concentrated effort to improve our capacity to raise funds for the Friendship Center. We have made progress, but have more work to do.

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¹ Mark Ragins, *A Road to Recovery: A Program of Mental Health America of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Mental Health America of Los Angeles, 2010), 10-11.