

Building the Faith



FaithLink Board of Trustees and riders (left to right) Gary Hustus, Mr. and Mrs. Pranis Sablausta, Reverend Peter Bayer, Florence Kesselring, Mary Ellen Heyman, Reverend Tom LeBeau, Reverend Bobbi Tobin, Bill McDonald.

By Rich Sampson

Located between the south shores of Lake Ontario and the northern outskirts of downtown Rochester, the town of Irondequoit, N.Y., was faced with a challenge: it had a strong commitment to treating the more than a quarter of its residents who are seniors with dignity and respect. That commitment was borne-out in a host of public and community-supported programs and initiatives to help older people in the area lead full and active lives. However, despite a multitude of services available to Irondequoit's seniors, many of them had little opportunity to access them.

“Irondequoit has a large population of older citizens and good resources established for them, but we did not have a good system to get them from their residences to where the services were located,” says Reverend Peter T. Bayer, President of St. Ann's Community, an elderly care facility supported by the Catholic Diocese of Rochester.

Not only was this mobility disconnect between services and people apparent to Reverend Bayer and his colleagues at St. Ann's, but also to those operating similar programs supported by many of Irondequoit's communities of faith. Local faith-based leaders had already formed an ecumenical group – the Irondequoit Ministerial Association – to work together on areas where their outreach programs might overlap and provide the best

resources for the town's residents most in need. As part of their regular meetings, the challenge of connecting the older members of the group's congregations to services quickly rose to the top of their agendas in the early months of 2003.

"The Ministerial Association rapidly coalesced around the notion that providing for the older residents in the town was a part of all our missions, but we didn't have an efficient method of getting more seniors to utilize them," said Gary Hustis, a member of the Ministerial Association.

Recognizing the importance and immediacy of these unmet needs, the Ministerial Association established a working group in the spring of 2003 to begin studying how best to link the older members of their faith communities, and Irondequoit's senior residents in general, to existing and expanded services. The Association contributed seed money to support the study and offset any associated legal fees. The sub-group, comprised of both clergy and lay congregants, began its work already armed with data from the 2000 U.S. Census detailing the town's population of elderly residents. Of Irondequoit's 52,300 residents, nearly 14,000 were 60 years of age or older. After using the demographic information to pinpoint where older residents lived, the group then worked to chronicle the programs available to seniors, where they were located, and how their participants reached them.

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"Or," as Reverend Bayer says with a gentle laugh, "we didn't know what we didn't know. We could be

considered what Saint Paul called fools for the sake of our faiths."

Finding Transportation Expertise

As much as their technical expertise on transportation might have been limited, the group clearly recognized two elements that would be essential to launching any potential transit service: investment and political will – and the former could not be achieved without first securing the latter. In order to do so, the group determined they would need a well-conceived plan, with concise goals and a practical operations strategy for their transportation proposal before approaching public officials. Fortunately, the mission of the Ministerial Association – and its transportation sub-group – as conduits of community service allowed for easy identification of goals. Simply put, the transportation effort would serve the transportation needs of seniors living in Irondequoit.

Reverend Tom LeBeau, Pastor of the Seneca United Methodist Church, and a member of the Ministerial Association explained that, "we had a genuine desire to help as many seniors in Irondequoit as possible, and so we never felt the need to establish unnecessary barriers for eligibility. That was the benefit of this effort coming forth from an existing group like the Ministerial Association – we already had forged strong and trusting relationships."

With a clear vision of its priorities

for a new transportation service established, the group turned its attention to developing an operating structure for that service. Again being the recipients of good fortune, several working group members noted the good work already being done in Irondequoit, as well as in the greater Rochester area, by Medical Motor Service. [For more information on Medical Motor Service, see page 7 – ed.] Established in Rochester in 1919, Medical Motor connects people in the Rochester area to medical and social services, especially those with specialized transportation needs. In Fiscal Year 2006, Medical Motors provided or brokered over 750,000 trips. Recognizing that creating their own transportation operation would mark a daunting financial and logistical challenge, the group decided to reach out to Medical Motor and its Executive Director, Bill McDonald.

"Having a quality operation already established in the area like Medical Motors was a tremendous asset for us as we were planning our service," says Gary Hustis. "It was pretty apparent that an important part of the puzzle was right in front of us."

The group arranged meetings with McDonald and his staff, explaining their priorities for the service, including its likely riders, destinations, hours of operation, vehicles and other operational parameters. Among these initial discussions, the parties became

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Medical Motors' driver Will Hayes assists Mr. Sablausta aboard FaithLink.

comfortable with an arrangement where once capital investment was secured for a vehicle, that vehicle would be provided to Medical Motors for its general fleet, and the agency would in turn provide service using its entire operations resources to Irondequoit's older residents.

"We planned it essentially as a barter system," McDonald explains. "They would deliver a vehicle to us, and we would provide a comparable level of service."

Reverend Bayer adds that, "beyond the benefit of melding our service with an experienced transportation provider, the arrangement would offer our passengers better service because we would have access to Medical Motors' entire fleet to schedule trips, not just a single vehicle. It also allowed us to offer completely accessible service."

Securing Investment

With a firm concept of the potential service sketched-out, the group now prepared to arrange the necessary public investment to get the operation underway. Group members again leveraged existing relationships the Ministerial Association had built with town of Irondequoit officials and New York State Senator James Alesi. When approached by the Association for help in securing financing, both town leaders and Senator Alesi were impressed with the group's plans and preparations, especially their prospective coordination with Medical Motors.

"We all knew that we needed to help our senior residents get rides and access the many fabulous programs already in place for them," says Irondequoit Town Supervisor Mary Ellen Heyman. "When the Ministerial Association came to us

with the plans in-hand, it really put everything together."

Senator Alesi agrees: "all the advance work done by the group made it very easy for me to arrange funding to purchase a vehicle for the service."

Indeed, the state and local officials followed-through on their pledges. Senator Alesi used a provision in the New York Senate's procedures known as a member's item to award a \$40,000 capital grant for the purchase of a new van for the service. Meanwhile, the town of Irondequoit contributed a portion of its Community Development Block Grant funds through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to support operations expenses, totaling \$20,000.

Fueled by these investment sources, the Ministerial Association formed Irondequoit Senior Transportation Ministry, Inc., in October, 2003. The new entity would be the recipient of the governmental funds and the official administrator of the new service, which it aptly named FaithLink. Soon after, it forged an official relationship with Medical Motors to operate the system. It also worked closely with Medical Motors to select the most appropriate vehicle to maximize the value of the investment. With the transfer of the new van into Medical Motors' fleet, FaithLink was launched in October, 2003.

Sharing the Word

Not surprisingly, the goals established by the initial work of the Ministerial Association were translated into operational policies for the service from its outset. Trips on FaithLink would be free to any Irondequoit resident over 60 years old who resided in a private home or apartment. Those residents would call a dedicated phone line staffed by Medical Motors to ensure their eligibility through a simple application form. Once registered for FaithLink, each participant would be eligible for up

to eight one-way trips per month to destinations such as medical and legal appointments, ongoing treatment and therapy, trips to the pharmacy and visits to immediate family members in healthcare facilities. Service is available Monday thru Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., with two days advance registration. While all trips would be free regardless of circumstance, donations of any amount were encouraged and accepted.

And although FaithLink would appear to have a natural market based on the demographics of the town, it was important to get the word out on the initiation of the new program. Once again, the effort found a tremendous promotional resource available inherent in its structure: the pulpit. Clergy and laity from all the Ministerial Associations' 23 faith communities spread the word in church services, bulletins, and – most importantly – word of mouth between congregants during the holiday season in the winter of 2003-04. The group prepared easy-to-understand promotional materials, and instructed faith communities to forward questions on enrolling in the service to the staff at Medical Motors. FaithLink's foundation within churches and faith communities resonated strongly with Irondequoit's older citizens as a service that prioritized their interests first.

"Since it was coming from all different kinds of churches and faith communities, people quickly appreciated that FaithLink was an expression of caring," says Bobbi Tobin, Pastor of the Irondequoit Presbyterian Church. "They could see that making a profit was not the motive, but rather to help everyone in our town live full and independent lives."

Through the community-based communications effort, FaithLink gradually has built ridership. In Fiscal Year 2006, the service provided over 1,600 rides, building



FaithLink provides over 1,600 rides each year.

to a total of more than 4,500 since the initiation of operations in October, 2003. According to Stacy Lilley, the primary administrator of FaithLink for Medical Motors, the service has enrolled around 270 riders and expects to reach around 300 this summer. She also notes that around 10-12 percent of passengers use a wheelchair or other accessibility devices.

"The FaithLink riders are an absolute joy to work with," says Lilley. "They're very knowledgeable about how the service operates, and always so appreciative to have it available to them."

The reflections of FaithLink passengers bear-out this sentiment as well.

"Everyone with FaithLink is always so good to us," says passenger Florence Kesselring. "It helps me get to my appointments so I don't have to burden my family so much."

Rider Pranis Sablausta agrees, adding: "I used to have trouble reaching each appointment because of my wheelchair. Now, I just call FaithLink and they get me where I need to go."

As much as the leaders of FaithLink at the Ministerial Society are pleased with the results of the service, they want to do more. While grateful for the investment provided through their elected officials, and the strong relationship with Medical Motors, the dollars only go so far. Trips are

not provided to destinations beyond medical and legal appointments and services, such as shopping, social visits or a trip to the beauty shop.

"Unfortunately, we can't do everything for everyone, as much as we'd like to," says Gary Hustis. "But, by setting priorities and being responsible stewards of the public's investment, we can do something to make a difference for many people."

The Golden Rule

By leveraging a solid base of concerned and connected faith communities, seniors in Irondequoit now have a way to reach the services and programs they need the most. The story of building FaithLink goes beyond even the vital actions of selecting vehicles, acquiring funds, and providing service. It bears witness to the power of forging bonds with community leaders and experienced transportation practitioners, finding a foundation rooted in righteous goals and ideals, and, ultimately, helping people.

As Reverend Bayer puts it, "its nothing short of responding to the golden rule. And it's been worth its weight in gold."