



On December 23rd, members of Massanutten Presbyterian Church joined the community at the opening ceremony for the Open Doors **Navigation Center**. The Navigation Center hosts a year-round, overnight shelter for adults experiencing homelessness. The shelter contains space for up to 80 congregant beds and four universal rooms, with other support facilities.

The Navigation Center is a newly constructed facility adjacent to what was formerly owned by the Presbytery of Shenandoah at 1111 North Main Street. The presbytery sold the building to the City of Harrisonburg in anticipation of its designation as a permanent low-barrier space to address homelessness in our area. In addition to this, the presbytery provided significant financial support to the commercial grade kitchen that will be used to prepare meals for guests.



Although the facility is new, the ministry is not. In 2007, Open Doors (formerly Harrisonburg Rockingham Thermal Shelter), began with 20 sleeping spaces, crock pots of soup and stew, and brown bag breakfasts provided by faith communities throughout the city. Each Monday morning the mats would be packed up and moved to a new location, and another congregation would provide hospitality.

Since that very first year, Massanutten has been fully engaged. We have worked with Trinity and First Presbyterian Churches serving in their space. When county locations began hosting, our fellowship hall, narthex and library became that much needed safe, warm space. And, a group of Massanutten drivers became an essential part of the team transporting guests from the city to county shelter sites each evening and back again in the morning.

For many years, Julia Sensabaugh served as our Lead Volunteer. Along with attending the annual training held by Open Doors staff, Julia coordinated meals, donations, cooks, servers, cleaners and ‘whatever else came up’ for our hosting week. When asked why she gave so generously of herself, she said simply, *“I saw the need and I felt like I could fill it.”*

Over the years Julia has learned a lot about the landscape of homelessness in our area. Each person’s story is different. While there may be some common threads, there is no single reason why people find themselves without stable housing. Reasons can include mental illness, family challenges, availability of affordable housing, life changes and crises, job loss. In short, homelessness is complicated.

She’s also seen some familiar faces. Julia’s a retired teacher and she, along with other teachers in the congregation, have been deeply impacted by the sight of a former student coming through the serving line. Knowing a guest in another context brings the complexity of homelessness to the fore.

Julia’s commitment and passion has shaped the congregation’s involvement. She’s encouraged individuals and groups to plan a meal together, to sit and talk with guests, to learn about the people who find shelter in our space. When COVID changed the way we could support guests, Julia created safe opportunities for families to come to the church to prep and cook meals ahead of transporting them to the shelter location.

All the ways we have been involved in Open Doors have been made possible by the congregation’s generosity. Whether the shelter was in our space or at another facility, the people of Massanutten have faithfully provided food, transportation, supplies, funding and countless volunteer hours throughout these 18 years.



Unfortunately, home insecurity is not a thing of the past—and so we are not finished. We continue to commit ourselves to this vital community ministry. Currently we are transporting meals from Sentara RMH to the Navigation Center each evening, and members of the congregation serve on the board and/or are training for new volunteer roles. We anticipate the need for volunteers to help with meal prep, serving, and cleaning will continue in the future.

We’re excited to be part of this new chapter for Open Doors and to deepening our commitment to understanding and addressing the challenges faced by our neighbors.

*Lord, guide me on my journey in this New Season of Generosity*