

History moment #5: Jubilee Shop, another leap of Faith

30 years ago, on December 5, 1981, the Jubilee Shop opened its doors on Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis to sell Self Help crafts. Four moves, multiple expansions, and millions of dollars of sales later, that shop continues as the Ten Thousand Villages store on Grand Avenue in St. Paul.

Judy Harder, a young member of Faith Mennonite who was living in the Twin cities for 3 years while her husband Steve was completing a Family Practice residency, had a vision for starting a Self Help store. A dietician by training, she was taking a leave to start their family, and had an abundance of energy and generosity.

The global fair trade movement had begun in the 1950's through the visionary work of Edna Ruth Byler. Byler was struck by the overwhelming poverty she witnessed during a trip to Puerto Rico in 1946, and was moved to bring artisans' products home to sell in North America. She began a grassroots campaign among her family and friends in the United States by selling handcrafted products out of the trunk of her car. Byler made a concerted effort to educate her community about the lives of artisans around the world, as well as to provide a dignified living for artisans in developing countries. That pioneering work grew into Self Help crafts, now Ten Thousand Villages.

In the 1970's Canadian Mennonite congregations began selling Self Help handcrafts in their thrift stores to raise funds for MCC. In 1973, the first joint thrift and self help store was started in the US, in Bluffton, Ohio. By the end of the decade there were a handful of self help stores in the US, all of them supporting themselves with their thrift business. No one thought that a store selling handcrafts alone could be self sustaining.

But back to our story here in the Twin Cities....Judy brought the idea of finding a way to sell Self Help in the Twin Cities to her small group for discernment, who enthusiastically supported the idea. On March 14, 1981 a small group met with Lois Kreider, who had started the Bluffton store, to explore the feasibility of starting a store in the Twin Cities. The group initially discussed the possibility of the combined thrift and self help model; this seemed unworkable for several reasons—that the Twin cities already had plenty of thrift stores, and that such an operation required a much larger pool of volunteers than our small congregation could produce.

Through the spring meetings, a tentative plan emerged: the store could supplement its income by selling books on peace and justice and simple living, and children's books with a global emphasis. Book sales had a markup of 40-50%, as compared to 15% for the Self Help crafts. A trial sale was scheduled during advent at the Minnesota Church Center on Franklin Avenue. Partner churches were found, in the New Hope Mennonite Brethren church, Temple Baptist Church, and Park Avenue Methodist. On May 31, a congregational meeting was called to update members on the plans. A questionnaire in the summer indicated adequate volunteer interest and skills. Helen Quintela and Arlene Holdeman joined Judy in enthusiastic leadership for this project.

As the ad hoc committee continued to meet, it appeared there was enough interest to proceed with a permanent store. A variety of locations were considered. A retail space became available just two blocks from Judy and Steve's home; this was convenient, because Judy had just given birth to their first child, Esther. The store front was on Chicago Avenue just north of Lake Street; two factors that made it attractive were the low rent, and the parking available in the lot of the Sears building to the rear.

At a meeting on November 1, the Congregation approved the opening of an MCC Self Help store, as a wholly owned mission of Faith Mennonite. Start up funds of \$10,000 were sought to secure the initial inventory and pay rent; \$6000 of this had already been pledged. A lease was signed for the Chicago avenue property; inventory was ordered. A cash register and display case were donated. A host of volunteers descended on the space, cleaning, painting, installing shelves and fixtures.

The name of Jubilee Shop: International Handcrafts was chosen, derived from the Old Testament 50th year of Jubilee, when justice would prevail, debts would be erased, and all property returned to its original owners. This reflected the Self Help vision of fair wages for all people and sustainable work for craftsmen in impoverished countries. An out of work local artist was recruited to hand paint a sign for the storefront. Joan Kreider created the logo featuring symbols of green growth and new life.

Jack Janzen chaired the 9-member board, Helen Quintela was Secretary, and David Birky treasurer. The first volunteer managers were Judy Harder and Arlene Holdeman, and Frank Trnka volunteered his skills as manager of the book selections.

The first shipment of crafts arrived in mid November to Judy's home; she invited others to come and preview the wares: wooden platters from Haiti, baskets and jute plant hangers from Bangladesh, shining brass candlesticks from India, ornately carved shesham wood jewelry boxes from India, carved elephants from Kenya, olive wood camel trains and nativity sets from Palestine, ornaments and Christmas decorations from Taiwan. It was thrilling!

Four short weeks after Faith Mennonite approved the project, on November 29, the congregation crammed itself into the tiny space of the shop. Pastor Myron Schrag led the congregation in a litany of dedication. And the following Saturday, December 5, Jubilee Shop opened its doors. Cookies were served; free gifts of jute angels were given to the first 200 customers. It was launched! People came, told their friends, and then returned again and again.

By a year of operation, the Jubilee shop was selling more Self Help products than all but one other store in the US, and was self sustainable. By the third year of operation, there was enough profit to send \$5000 of seed money to help start a store in Portland. A few years later, the store dropped its book sales when it moved to the Riverside Avenue location next to St. Martins Table. And a few years after that, was able to hire its first paid manager, Mary Friesen.

It started with an idea, a vision, a small group of people with energy. An idea which had never before been tried, suspected to be unworkable. Now the shop started by Faith Mennonite Church is the standard business model for the 350 retail Ten Thousand Villages stores across the US and Canada.

It is just one more example of why our congregation has aptly been named Faith.