



History of Hearts and Hands:

In the late 1990's, Reverend Mary Ann Pula, associate pastor at First United Methodist Church of Akron, NY, realized that members of her congregation were having a hard time getting to church as they got older. She found they were also having problems getting to doctor's appointments, to the grocery store and even out with friends. Pula was authorized through the support of Pastor Wayne West to develop and implement a model for recruiting and training congregation members to assist members and friends of the church who desired to have home visitation, prayer and communion regularly.

Mary Ann's position developed into a significant ministry at Akron UMC for seven years. Pula realized that this model was needed for the wider community. She came up with a plan that used local churches to recruit volunteers and care receivers. Along with driving care receivers to appointments, Pula included light household chores and routine maintenance, as well as friendly phone calls and visits to the list of tasks that volunteers could accomplish. When realized, the results of such a program would be that older and physically challenged people would be able to live with dignity and independence, improving the quality of their lives while remaining in their homes of choice.

With the support of her pastor, Pula set out to find support and funding for her idea. Sometime in 2002, Rev. West received a letter about grant funds for developing community programs to assist older residents. Pula applied and received the grant, and began to transition from her ministerial role to coordinate and implement the program in the larger community of Akron/Newstead. The seed was planted; what would eventually become Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action took root and began to grow.

2003: Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action is founded with a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, linked with the broader program Faith in Action, a national association of faith-based service groups. Rev. Mary Ann Pula becomes the organization's first executive director.

Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action's service in Akron-Newstead and the Tonawanda Indian Reservation officially begins with Caring Sabbath on February 23, 2003. Ten churches support the effort and plan their Sunday services to celebrate volunteerism, and to encourage attendance at an open house at Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action's office. Through the support of Supervisor Gerald Summe, the Town of Newstead becomes a community partner, and provides the organization with office space at 50 John Street, the former Denio Public Library.

2005: Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action becomes a United Way agency, receiving support through the United Way from grants and individual donations.

2006: Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action expands its services to Alden.

2007: The Wales expansion begins. Wales Community Baptist Church offers the organization space in a structure on the church grounds for a satellite office. By this time, the organization has 19 coalition churches and several community partners.

During a flight delay while returning home from a Faith in Action Conference, Executive Director Mary Ann Pula sits next to an artist who happens to be sketching pairs of hands. Pula tells her about Hearts and Hands. Hali Emminger of Midlothian, Virginia, begins to create a drawing composed of two hands, just touching: one is strong, the other smaller and more vulnerable. Together the hands form a heart, colored a vibrant red. Emminger donates the art to Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action, and it becomes the organization's logo, now seen on badges, bags, cups, banners and all printed materials.

Linda Mapes completes a photo essay depicting the many facets of Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action. Today that photo essay hangs in the Akron office.

By this time, Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action's funding sources include grants from the United Way, the John Oishei Foundation, and the Erie County Department of Senior Services. The organization had also received grants from the East Hill Foundation and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

2008: Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action bids farewell to Executive Director Mary Ann Pula, as she moves on to a position as Director of Pastoral Care for Beechwood Continuing Care and the Blocher Homes. The organization welcomes James Y. Bender to the leadership role. Bender, a Certified Fundraising Professional, brings a decade of human services administration and nine years of fundraising experience to Hearts and Hands. He is charged with the mission of expanding the organization into new areas of rural and suburban Erie County.

2010: Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action receives a grant from the E&W Greatbatch Foundation for expansion into Clarence. The Town of Clarence becomes a community partner, offering the organization space at 5635 Goodrich Road in Clarence Center, NY for its second satellite office.

2011: Faith in Action National Network changes its name to National Volunteer Caregiving Network (NVCN). While Faith in Action remains a part of the corporate name, Hearts and Hands - Faith in Action begins calling itself simply "Hearts and Hands." The organization now has one full time position, and five part time positions.

2012: Hearts and Hands expands services into Marilla and Holland. The organization also receives a grant from the federal government, administered through the NFTA, which enables it to increase services, including offering van service for wheelchair transports.

The organization begins receiving assistance through the VISTA program, and receives a full time AmeriCorps VISTA worker to help coordinate a new program: Community Outreach Councils. These councils comprised of volunteers operate in each area served by Hearts and Hands to work on publicity and marketing, as well as fundraising.

2013: Hearts and Hands sets itself a new goal: to become the premier volunteer organization in Western New York.

2014: A new benchmark is reached in March: over 500 care receivers are served by Hearts and Hands. The organization begins expansions into Boston, NY, as well as into Amherst and Lockport. A new funder, the Grigg Lewis Foundation, helps to support expansion into Lockport. The organization employs 4 full time and 4 part time staff and one AmeriCorps VISTA worker.

Working with Sponsorship Network Plus, Hearts and Hands begins a new marketing initiative, a sponsorship program to widen name recognition for the organization as it begins to expand into Erie County and into parts of Niagara County.

2015: Hearts and Hands serves over 700 care receivers with over 350 volunteers. Administrative offices move to 2710 North Forest Road, Suite 205, Getzville, NY in the Town Square for Aging, with program coordination offices in Akron, Amherst, Clarence, Lockport and the Southtowns (Wales).