

A Continuing Vision

by John Wiens, May 2004

Reminiscences on the founding of Waterloo Mennonite Homes senior's apartments 27 George St Waterloo Ontario.

What follows are some recollections of how we came to establish Waterloo Mennonite Homes.

In early 1975 Deacon J.P. Dick on behalf of some senior members of WK United Mennonite Church suggesting that the feasibility of building senior's apartments and /or extended care facilities near the Church be investigated.

An ad hoc committee was formed consisting of Henry Bergen, Waldemar Epp, Jake Neufeld, and Paul Neufeld to do some exploratory work. The outcome of this was that a formal committee was elected at a congregational meeting. A meeting was held September 13, 1976 to organize the first Board of Directors: Eric Dirksen , Henry Dueck, John Wiens, John Enns, Anne Bergen, Paul Klassen, Frank Klassen, Rudi Rempel, Henry Pankratz.

In 1976 & 1977 we purchased 2 properties on George Street. One from the Wells Estate and one from Grant Glennie.

Investigations were made to see what kind of Government programs to support this type of project were available. We found that there was a program administered by Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation (CMHC) however current support was for low income family housing. We would have to make a strong case for senior's housing. There was no support for extended care. Work was done with the City to have a proposed by-law change to include seniors housing.

At the same time by-laws and letters patent were developed and applied for. Surveys were developed and carried out to provide justification for our project.

The first annual meeting was held in 1977. The new Board of Directors were: John Enns, Anne Bergen, John Wiens , Henry Dueck , Frank Klassen , Paul Klassen , Henry Pankratz , Rudi Rempel , Eric Dirksen.

On May 2, 1977 we were granted Letters Patent incorporating Waterloo Mennonite Homes as a nonprofit corporation to provide homes for people of low income.

We had many meetings with CMHC. Based on their economic guidelines we wanted to build a 6 story building.

Some false starts - we hired an architect to prepare plans only to find that CMHC rules had changed and funding would not cover the architect method. Only a design & build approach would be acceptable. So we were stuck with fees from the architect. We tried to keep the neighborhood informed of our plans. To our dismay we found quite a lot of objections. One of

the main ones was the height of the building. After many negotiations we felt that we could make the project carry itself on the basis of a 4 story building, After this and the addition of two community members to our board we had support from the community.

Changes to city by-laws were required re parking. One neighbor objected to the looks of the building. We worked with him made some changes and thought that we were ok now. However on the last day appeal was allowed this neighbor objected and the matter had to go to the Ontario Municipal Board. This meant that we had to hire a lawyer to represent us at the hearing. This process caused another delay. On the day of the hearing November 29, 1979, we were well prepared and after hearing our submission the Board only took a few minutes to approve our project.

The many delays were disappointing and costly. We had purchased two properties next to the education wing. To finance this and other costs we raised money from within the congregation and were able to raise enough money. Some in donations and some by borrowing from our membership. Offering members the same interest as Canada Savings Bonds were paying. For a number of years because of delays we could not pay the interest on these loans and had to go back and ask our members to add the interest to their original loan. Many simply donated the interest and some donated the entire loan. Almost all of the loans were for small amounts. It was gratifying to have such wide support. Many widows made these loans out of their meager savings.

A lot of prayers were said during this period and with God's help all necessary approvals were finally in place.

In late 1979 a construction contract was awarded to Freure Construction to design & build the apartment. During the construction period we advertised our apartments and had information meetings. To show prospective tenants what the apartments would look like we made a full scale layout on the gym floor with masking tape so people could walk through the units to get a feel for the size and location of the rooms.

In Oct 1980 our first tenants moved in. The official opening was held on November 16 1980. This was held in the gym with many special guests including Harold Freure the builder, CMHC representative, City of Waterloo and our local MP. The Kitchener TV station recorded an interview with John Wiens including a tour of an apartment for the evening news.

Board members at the time of the grand opening were: Anne Bergen, John Dyck, John Enns, Ludwig Gubler, Charles Klassen, Bob Kleinschmidt, Fred Neufeld, Bernie Poetker, Rosemary Rowe, Henry Wiens, and John Wiens.

We are glad that the vision started with a few members, was nurtured by many more has provided a home for many seniors over the years. With God's help it will continue for many years to come.