

# Westmoreland Volunteer Corps Celebrates 20 Years of Service to the D.C. Community

BY: JOHN PIELMEIER, Westmoreland Volunteer Corps

In 1985, a few imaginative lay members of the Westmoreland Congregational Church of Christ convinced the church to use a vacant (but very saleable) parsonage as the home for a new volunteer corps program. Five college graduates were recruited from around the country to provide a year of volunteer service to Washington-area agencies that provided services to the urban poor (health services, legal services, housing, employment and maternity services). During the subsequent 20-year history of this non-denominational program, the Westmoreland Volunteer Corps (WVC) has hosted and supported 100 volunteers, many of whom say their lives were forever changed by their volunteer corps experience.

Nearly a quarter of these volunteers returned June 17 – 19 for a richly rewarding reunion weekend. Activities ranged from thought-provoking to nostalgic to musically entertaining as the volunteers were joined by former board members and spiritual advisors, agency representatives, church members, families, representatives of other volunteer corps and friends to celebrate this milestone.



Members of the Westmoreland community cut the cake for the celebration.

A Friday evening cookout was a homecoming for many who delighted in seeing family. On Saturday morning, social activist and NAACP Board Chairman Julian Bond offered an inspiring keynote address about the power of volunteerism, noting that his volunteer participation in the civil rights movement – “the largest spontaneous volunteer effort in American history” – changed the course of his life. Subsequent panelists took on related topics related to our overall theme of “Church-based volunteerism in our new century - 200 years and still evolving.” The panelists and the 80 attendees together discussed the impact of the WVC and ways for church-based volunteer programs to be even more relevant in this new century. Panelists included representatives of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and the National Christian Church’s Gethsemane Mission Year as well as the executive director of AIM (Action in Montgomery County), DC metropolitan area service agency directors and former volunteers.

An entertaining evening of music and skits (and a traditionally sumptuous Westmoreland potluck dinner) gave everyone a chance to share creativity and their fond memories.

Gordon Forbes, WCUCS minister when the corps was founded and a strong supporter of the program, provided the Sunday sermon. The sermon challenged the congregation to bridge chasms between societal and physical opposites, and praised the founding board, the church and all 100 volunteers for their devotion and commitment to service. He also applauded the group for doing



Westmoreland community members enjoying the celebration potluck dinner.

Christ’s work close to home. Former volunteers and Charlotte Rogers, spiritual advisor for the program’s first ten years, also had important roles in the Sunday service. The founding members of the volunteer corps and other key leaders received commemorative plaques citing their courage in establishing the corps, one of the first volunteer corps in the country organized and managed by a single church.

Two publications were produced for the reunion: 1) a brochure “Starting a Volunteer Corps” that provides guidance to churches that might want to establish their own volunteer corps (1000 copies will be provided for the upcoming UCC synod) and 2) “20 Years in Service: Reflections on Westmoreland Volunteer Corps” a collation of comments from former volunteers, board members and agency representatives about the value of the volunteer experience and the role that volunteers have played in supporting the work of service agencies in the Washington metropolitan area. These publications and additional information about the Westmoreland Volunteer Corps can be obtained by visiting the church’s web site at [www.westmorelanducc.org](http://www.westmorelanducc.org).