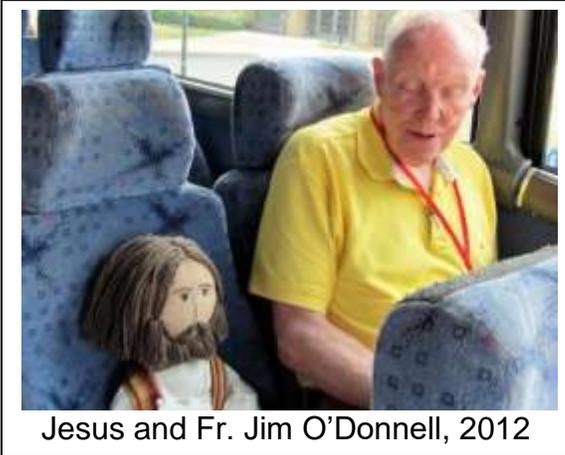


## Let's Celebrate Jesus Cleveland



Jesus and Fr. Jim O'Donnell, 2012

*By Fr. Jim O'Donnell*

August 12, 1972 marked the beginning of a week in Cleveland, Ohio called "Let's Celebrate Jesus."

A year previous to that week in 1972, Jean Vanier asked our core group of Faith and Sharing to plan a seven day retreat to be held in the seven poorest areas of Cleveland. It was a daunting challenge! Totally unlike other retreats of Faith and Sharing we had no GPS, no compass to guide us as this retreat would not be conducted in the usual Faith and Sharing format. And not one of us on the planning team lived in any of the truly poorest areas of Cleveland. Embracing this challenge, one of our team members studied the city of Cleveland and put us on track to the seven poorest neighborhoods.

As I look back to those seven areas of our city today, I realize they are the ones where the most revitalization has occurred. Thousands of new homes have been built by Habitat for Humanity. Food centers have been established in all seven areas and facilities for the homeless are now available.

This first Cleveland Faith and Sharing retreat had two dimensions. Each day began in quiet time before the Blessed Sacrament. Afterwards Father Bill Clarke animated and announced the Word of God to a small group of retreatants while Jean Vanier visited local jails, and poor nursing homes throughout the seven targeted neighborhoods.

The menu for the week was peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for every meal. Yes you understood me correctly! With every meal we were treated to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches which had been made in advance and frozen by many volunteers throughout the city.

On the very first evening while Jean was speaking, a person was killed nearby. We began our evening with African American Spirituals led by Willie Mae Wright, a Pentecostal preacher who became a shepherd and guide as we travelled through the neighborhoods. After Jean shared the Word of God, we would close the evening in silent prayer.

As the week progressed we could sense a hopefulness in the midst of great sufferings and poverty. We witnessed a resilience in the people as they prayed, sang, danced and shared their lives with us.

People who had no hope discovered hope.

People who suffered greatly discovered compassion.



Fr. Bill Clarke  
1981



There are many fruits that grew out of Let's Celebrate Jesus week. Our Cleveland L'Arche community was established in Hough, one of the first neighborhood sites we visited during "Celebrate Jesus" week. The founding of the Little Brothers and Sisters of the Eucharist in the Central Neighborhood was yet another fruit of the retreat. It is there in

Central where Maggie and I spent the next forty years in a ministry of prayer and presence. Both of us spent many hours in the juvenile detention center, the jail and prisons, visiting the lonely and embracing the families and children by living a ministry of presence in the neighborhood. Faith and Sharing has been a gift and treasure that nurtured us as we lived out a vocation to set up our tent among the least and most marginalized of peoples.



Sr. Maggie and Fr. Jim, 2012

As I reflect back over these forty-five years, I am deeply humbled and grateful for all the lives that have been touched. The many children who came through our doors during those years, now return to us as adults to bless us with their spouses and children. We were able to bless our people and now it is our people who bless us.

Let us give thanks together as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the beginnings of Faith and Sharing in North America. Let us celebrate its fruitfulness and blessings. Let's Celebrate Jesus! 💜

