

Ministry Fund

FSPA ministry grant helps sustain community meal program

“If we each do something,” says Brother Dave Schwab, Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, “our collective energy and effort will gradually make a difference in our world.” Brother Dave’s ministry—St. Benedict the Moor Parish and Meal (St. Ben’s), a Capuchin Franciscan ministry in Milwaukee, Wis.—was established over 100 years ago to affect change for the better in the lives of the growing African American population in the area. Still striving to assist the community’s underserved today, St. Ben’s pools the resources of hundreds of volunteers to carry out its four core ministries—its parish, tending spiritual and educational needs; a clinic, providing quality health care; jail chaplaincy, aiding Milwaukee County inmates; and community meal, serving food and a whole lot more.



Each August Sister Bernadette Prochaska (not pictured), and the Community Building Committee host the Back to School Event which provides school supplies and reading books to almost 200 inner city children. Brother Dave Schwab is shown at far right.

Photo courtesy of Brother Dave Schwab

With the support of 75 local church and civic group sponsors that provide food and financial assistance, St. Ben’s Community Meal began serving supper Sunday through Friday to those in need in 1966. “We serve meals to an average of 335 people per night—102,000 individuals in 2008,” says Brother Dave. “About 70 percent of our population is African American. Two-thirds are homeless, living on the streets or in nearby shelters, and the rest are the ‘working poor,’ those who have jobs and apartments but come to St. Ben’s to meet their need for food,” he says. Brother Dave reports a slight increase in guests over the past four months and forecasts prolonged growth as the country’s recession continues. “Unfortunately,” he says, “our income may also be affected adversely with so many people and businesses facing decline.”

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration have helped to sustain St. Ben’s Community Meal since 2005 with the aid of ministry grants and Sister Bernadette Prochaska. She serves both the Building Community Committee and the program’s guests at mealtime each month. Sister Bernadette says she has found St. Ben’s to be not only “a happy place,” but a space for spiritual growth as well. “There is a familial exchange between those who are serving and those who are eating. Gratitude,” she says, “is certainly present.” Guests of St. Ben’s most assuredly feel grateful for not only the food



Bernadette Prochaska, FSPA

they are given, but also for the help available to them outside the dining room. The ID Assistance Program “is one of our major efforts,” says Brother Dave, who reports that in 2008, \$18,000 was spent to provide IDs for almost 1,000 people. Essential for entry into homeless shelters and application for medical benefits and jobs, “a Wisconsin state identification card is the passport to many services for the homeless who are really hurting without it,” he says. St. Ben’s also purchases bus tickets for clients in need of emergency transportation, offers financial and tutoring assistance to those seeking GEDs and assures that many other needs, like emergency clothing and personal hygiene products, are met for their clients each day.

Brother Dave has witnessed the cycle of social injustice that keeps St. Ben’s Community Meal program busy. “A high percentage of our guests are here frequently, and the fact that we have been ‘in business’ for 38 years means that a lot of them are stuck in the system.” He sees many clients become homeless by way of poverty, joblessness, addiction, “and certainly due to mental illness or a history of incarceration.” Brother Dave says that St. Ben’s is currently weighing the idea of providing affordable housing. “There is strong evidence across the country that if we are to really help folks move out of homelessness, providing housing is critical.”

As its causes evolve, St. Ben’s will continue to rely on the help of supporters like Sister Bernadette and the FSPA. “I can see the FSPA community commitment to fighting injustice on many levels—prayerful and financial,” says Brother Dave.

Sister Bernadette’s godson Billy

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Pax Christi group 'puts passion for justice into action'

It was the peaceful challenge posed by Father John Dear, S.J., who spoke of the nonviolent Jesus at the Franciscan Spirituality Center in the summer of 2008, that led to the inception of the Pax Christi group in La Crosse, Wis. Facilitated by FSC Director Vince Hatt and attended by about 20 Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration members and affiliates and La Crosse area residents, the group meets monthly to understand the history and spirit of the goals of Pax Christi—Peace of Christ—and to give witness to nonviolent activity as a means to a more just society.

Pax Christi USA is the American faction of the international Catholic peace movement that began as a collective prayer for peace and restoration in Germany during the Second World War. Over 60 countries worldwide host groups that act according to four priorities: spirituality of nonviolence and peacemaking; disarmament, demilitarization and reconciliation with justice; economic and interracial justice in the United States; and human rights and global restoration.

"One of the purposes of studying nonviolence is for all of us to consider taking the vow of nonviolence," says Vince. "It's easy to commit to in your mind's eye, but when the rubber hits the road it's a pledge to live nonviolently in all your relationships. We want to be nonviolent personally—to own it.

If we do, we will impact our own circles of influence."

Rita Feeney, FSPA, and former justice coordinator for the congregation, is a Pax Christi member who says that for her, the focus on nonviolence is a strong personal goal, one that she has always tried to impart to others around her. She recalls a trip to El Salvador—a tough time to uphold that private pledge. "In the moment of violence it is so hard to hang on to nonviolence. You have to lay claim to your own self-worth," she says, "yet, how do you accept the oppression that is happening and not get caught up?" The focus, as she sees it, is always political action. "Changing policy—that for me is where it happens. Take a political stance by writing letters, demonstrating, letting your voices be heard." Pax Christi members can put their "passion for justice into action," according to Sister Rita, by standing in solidarity with the Hispanic community in La Crosse and the surrounding area.

In December of 2008 Pax Christi discerned the call to voice their support for two projects, the first of which is meeting weekly during Lent for Soup and Nonviolent Study. "Each Wednesday during Lent, we fast throughout the day and then study nonviolence for an hour



From left, Pax Christi facilitator Vince Hatt, Joel House and FSPA affiliate Sharon Chavolla consider how nonviolent actions have shaped historical and personal experiences and what peaceable goals the group will aspire to.

at night," says Vince.

The second project supports the people in the Postville, Iowa, area. Donations from FSPA's Lenten appeal will be directed there, and the group hopes to raise additional funds as well. "The raid on immigrants there has left the town suffering humanitarian and economic disaster," says Vince. "Pax Christi wants to show our support personally and financially."

If you are interested in supporting or joining Pax Christi, contact Vince Hatt, 608-791-5298 or fscenter@fspa.org. ■

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the very issues of justice that attend the need for service. Now, later in my life, my involvement with AMOS and FSPA Justice, Peace and Integration with Creation Committee provides me with the opportunity to focus on the justice side of the issues that find people in the social service and criminal justice system. AMOS provides a new way for me to meet and carry out my commitment as an FSPA affiliate. ■

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Wright gives good example of what such outreach—food, a home, an identity and a family—can do. "When he lost his job, St. Ben's was paying his rent," recalls Sister Bernadette. His mental challenges and poor eyesight were contributing issues; St. Ben's had his eyes tested and went to court with him to secure disability benefits. Billy has since been a supporter of St. Ben's Community Meal, washing dishes there for the past 30 years. "St. Ben's is part of his identity," she says, "and for that he is a happy fellow." ■