

County churches work together to offer emergency help

You have to know where to look to see the poor in southern Anne Arundel County, an area better known for rolling horse farms and Washington exurbanites.

A few live in old farm houses. Still others are in trailer parks. Some live in modest houses but face enormous choices: to pay for heating oil or buy medicine? To pay the rent or eat?

“They are in some ways the hidden poor,” said Father Mark Logue, pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows, Owensville. “You drive by and see the big house and behind it is an old sharecropper’s house and people are living in it.” When he first arrived 11 years ago, he was surprised by how much poverty there was.

“We hide the poor because they’re wearing our clothes, and we give them food from the food pantry,” said Father Joseph Barr, pastor of Holy Family, Davidsonville.

“This may be a very tough winter for a lot of people,” said Father Joseph Cosgrove, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Edgewater, who donated the poor box offerings from Christmas Eve to the community, noting Christ’s birth was in a place that had no heat. “It’s the poor and elderly who will be suffering this winter; it’s appropriate to do it on Christmas Eve.”

To address the need, the three south county churches are working together to try deliver emergency help without duplicating services.

Father Barr said that county social services personnel often refer people who are eligible for food stamps or medical assistance to the church “because it takes time to go through the bureaucracy and they want to make sure they don’t fall through the gaps. They want to make sure they have their blood pressure medicine or they don’t go without their diabetes medicine.”

Last year, Holy Family spent more than \$100,000 in outreach to the community. Our Lady of Perpetual Help runs a food pantry, and Our Lady of Sorrows can help with a check to the propane company or the landlord.

“We’re just beginning to try to figure out a good way of maximizing it,” Father Logue said. “We want to make sure one family doesn’t get a lot of help while another gets nothing.”

One issue the churches haven’t been able to figure out is heating help.

Requests for that kind of help “are going through the roof,” said Father Cosgrove. In 2006, for example, in a three-month period from January to March, Holy Family gave \$6,953 in emergency assistance, much of it for fuel oil or BGE cut-off notices. In the six warm months from April to September, requests dropped to \$1,030, but in the three colder months of October to December, Holy Family had to give \$10,740 in emergency assistance.

Father Cosgrove notes that it’s a complicated issue, in part because a family has to buy a full load of fuel oil, and with prices dancing around \$3 a gallon, that’s a huge outlay of cash. Gas and electric bills, too, quickly become staggering sums.

Food assistance figures from Holy Family also show the deepening need: in the first quarter the church gave out \$650, by the last quarter of 2006, the church gave out \$2,790.

In addition to working together, the three Catholic parishes are seeking to work with churches of other faiths by participating in ministerial alliances. They’re also networking with community action agencies.

One topic of discussion, said Father Cosgrove, is setting up a general fund for fuel expenses.

While they try to find the best way to offer temporary help, they know the problems of the poor are increasing daily.

“We have gotten more requests for basic items,” Father Logue said. “People aren’t asking for a lot but they’re asking for food – what that tells me is their budget is really tight. Most folks want to pay their own way but you go to a grocery store and pick up a few things and it’s \$30.”