

Cumberland parishioners make big dent in poverty

When they learned from a member of the board of education that local school children were returning from summer vacation thinner than when they left, parishioners of Ss. Peter and Paul in Cumberland wanted to do something about it.

Working with members of nearby Emmanuel Episcopal Church, they came up with an innovative lunch box program that gets healthy food into the stomachs of hungry children.

Five days a week during the summer, volunteers pack about 150 lunches that are left in a cooler at a popular playground where children take the sandwiches, apples and bananas without feeling embarrassed.

The unique outreach, now entering its fourth year, is just one component of Ss. Peter and Paul's St. Anthony Place, a growing service ministry that celebrated its 10th anniversary Jan. 7.

Housed in the basement of the parish center, St. Anthony Place provides a well-stocked food pantry for hundreds of families in need. Volunteers distribute food market vouchers so clients can buy fresh meat, butter and eggs. Working with the Department of Social Services, they also provide medications and emergency financial assistance for utility bills.

St. Anthony Place is the only food pantry in the Cumberland area to provide diapers. Together with other area churches, it also has an outreach to travelers who have emergencies like broken-down cars.

Last year, nearly 1,600 families were served at St. Anthony Place - up from 729 when it first opened. The center is open Monday-Friday, operating for two hours each day.

Darlene Collins, St. Anthony Place's volunteer coordinator, said the parish ministry is very much needed in Allegany County. The Western Maryland community has suffered a long and punishing economic slump with the decline of major local

industries like railroading, brewing, glass manufacturing and tire production.

"It's a very depressed area and we do the best we can to meet the need," said Ms. Collins. "All the money that goes into the poor box automatically goes to St. Anthony Place."

Last year, more than \$25,000 was contributed to the poor box, according to Ms. Collins.

More than 75 percent of clients are single mothers with two or more children, said Ms. Collins, noting that many have several jobs, but can't make ends meet.

There are currently 32 parish volunteers at St. Anthony Place, most of whom are seniors. Children in the religious education program also help and Roger Lantz, a parishioner who runs a Cumberland bakery, donates 20 loaves of fresh bread every week.

But it's not just physical needs that are addressed.

"Our clients ask for prayer all the time," said Ms. Collins. "Especially if they have a son in Iraq. We get that more than anything. We always promise to pray for them."

Father James Kurtz, O.F.M., Cap., pastor, praised the volunteers for their dedication.

"A number of them have been there since the beginning," he said. "It's a great outreach in our parish and it gives people an opportunity to practice the corporal works of mercy."