

Ladies of Charity organization seeks to find new ways help poor people

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – The Ladies of Charity have always been dedicated to providing food, clothing and other assistance to the poor and needy. But as the international organization looks to the future, it is trying to find a new way to help the poor.

“Instead of always giving a handout, we want to give them a hand up,” said Albe McGurk of the Kansas City area, president of Ladies of Charity USA. The goal, she explained, is to develop a program that can get the poor to the services and training they need to pull themselves out of poverty.

McGurk presided over her organization’s national assembly in Nashville Sept. 16-18. Her term as president will end in January when Lucy Saunders of Newberg, Md., near Washington, who was installed at the end of the Nashville meeting, will officially take office.

Gayle Johnson, also of the Kansas City area, was installed as president-elect at the Nashville Assembly and will assume the office of president in 2013.

The Ladies of Charity, active in the United States since 1857, has nearly 8,000 members in local associations in 26 states. The Nashville association, which hosted the assembly, is marking its 100th anniversary this year.

The Ladies of Charity are part of the Vincentian Family, which includes the Daughters of Charity, the Sisters of Charity, Vincentian priests and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. McGurk said her organization is working with all of them to

implement systemic change as to how they all serve the poor.

“We’re trying to break the cycle of poverty, to give people hope,” added Johnson.

That will mean collaborating with other agencies, such as Catholic Charities USA, and churches to first assess the needs of the people they serve and then direct them to the appropriate services, whether that is treatment for substance abuse or job training, Johnson said.

The organization still has a long way to go before it can fully implement the systemic change it wants to make, McGurk said. While some associations are already providing such services, others are small or in rural areas and don’t have the necessary resources in place yet.

Another hurdle to the change is the current economic problems facing the country, said Saunders, because in many cases the jobs the poor need to pull themselves out of poverty are not available.

Requests for help from Ladies of Charity associations across the country is up dramatically, McGurk said. “Our food kitchens and thrift shops saw three times as many requests for aid,” she said.

The goal of the Ladies of Charity is not only to meet the physical needs of the poor, but to help restore a sense of hope for the people they serve, said Johnson.

And in doing so, she said, the members themselves are changed. “The poor change our lives through our work with them as much as we change their lives.”

It was the example of longtime members of the Ladies of Charity in her parish at Holy Ghost Church in Issue, Md., that attracted Saunders to the organization in 1992. She was inspired not only by the charity they showed to others, but “how they

were affected by what they did.”

“I believe the spirit of the Holy Ghost is there with the Ladies of Charity,” said Saunders. “That’s why we’re still here.”

The organization is working to raise its profile and to attract younger women to get involved. “We need to give to give them ... the Vincentian spirit,” Saunders said. “We need to pass those on.”

Speaker Candy Hill, Catholic Charities USA’s senior vice president for social policy and government affairs, praised the Ladies of Charity for responding to the call of the Gospel to care for the orphans, the widow and the stranger and to see the face of Christ in every person.”

She said that in a recent survey Catholic Charities agencies “found out it wasn’t the food, shelter, child care or financial assistance that was most important to our clients although it was needed and appreciated,” Hill said. “It was the fact that we treated someone with dignity and respect, they were listened to and not talked at, and someone walked with them as they made their way through the storm.”

In a homily at an anniversary Mass during the assembly, Vincentian Father Richard Gielow, spiritual moderator of the Ladies of Charity, told the women: “The church is blessed that you are who you are. While you have not had the power through the history of the church, you have been powerful.”

St. Vincent de Paul “saw that in you when he formed you in 1617, and knew that without you, we could not feed the poor and take care of the children,” he said. “While we are celebrating your anniversary, we are celebrating the powerful addition you have given to the church.”

The movement’s roots go back to St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, who

founded the Ladies of Charity and the Daughters of Charity. The assembly marked the 350th anniversary of their deaths.