

Missionary disciples at work

Respect for all human life from conception to natural death is a central tenet of our faith. It serves as the underpinning of what we believe, teach and practice. This core belief is at the heart of every ministry of Catholic Charities, inspires those who work in our Catholic schools and who carry out the important outreach and ministries of our parishes.

One such ministry is the Gabriel Network. What is it and how does it work?

A father recently lost his job while his wife was expecting their fourth child. A team of “angel friends” from St. Lawrence Martyr Parish in Jessup embraced the family in their time of crisis and provided them with support and assistance. The father asked one of the parishioners who reached out to him and his family, “Why are you doing this? You are Christians, we are Muslims. You don’t have to be here.” Through their gentle, consistent and loving witness, these angel friends shared Christ, who inspired them to serve in this ministry, with this family.

In another example of Gabriel Network’s effectiveness in promoting a culture of life, a young mother who left her troubled home with her newborn and toddler turned to the ministry when she realized she was alone and in desperate need of support. Her new apartment was furnished with just a chair, a stack of phone books, a small TV, a mattress and a few toys. Several months prior she had seen a sign for the Gabriel Network, so she found the number and called 800-ANGEL-OK. She was quickly introduced to an “angel friend,” who walked with her throughout her pregnancy, shared joys and sorrows, offered rides, brought a new Bible to her bedside to replace the tattered one she was reading through contractions, and held her hand through the birth of her daughter. After hearing about their new home, that angel friend’s parish community, consisting of Knights of Columbus, mom’s group members, parishioners on the respect life committee and others, embraced her and her family and showed them the love of Christ by befriending them and delivering truckloads of furniture, linens, baby supplies, books and toys.

I am often asked what missionary discipleship looks like. This is it. Our church thrives when we reach out beyond the four walls of the parish and into the “mission

territory” in which we are called to serve our brothers and sisters with the love of Christ and the joy of the Gospel. This is the “field hospital” envisioned by our beloved Pope Francis.

The Gabriel Network provides one vehicle for this missionary discipleship by serving families experiencing an unplanned pregnancy through its network of “angel friends” and engaged parishioners; a helpline for families; and maternity homes. Along with local pregnancy help centers that serve as partners in ministry, the Gabriel Network helps parishes answer the question, “What now?” by serving those moms and dads who have chosen life for their children in the face of untold challenges.

Pope Francis reminds us that “we do well to remember that each of us is a son or daughter,” and that “the great gift of life is the first gift that we received.” In doing so, we recognize that choosing life is not just about mothers and fathers and their unborn children; it’s about embracing all of the vulnerable, including those nearing the end of their earthly lives. Like the Gabriel Network “angel friends” accompanying these mothers throughout their pregnancies and beyond, so too are we called to embrace the elderly and sick with that same compassionate service and witness to the Gospel.

Doctor-assisted suicide is antithetical to this embrace (see page 6). “Just as God asks us to be his means of hearing the cry of the poor, so too he wants us to hear the cry of the elderly ... to reawaken the collective sense of gratitude, of appreciation, of hospitality, which makes the elderly feel like a living party of the community.” I echo Pope Francis’ call for a “Church that challenges the throw-away culture by the overflowing joy of a new embrace between young and old.”

To this end, I challenge you to accompany the sick and elderly – in your families, your parish communities, and in the mission territory to which you have been sent as disciples. Accompany them through their trials, their joys, and their suffering.

Read more from Archbishop Lori [here](#).