

Need to serve extends past Christmas season

From Thanksgiving to Christmas and right on through New Year's Day, people feel an overwhelming need to give of themselves through service.

When the holidays end, however, the needs of those being served in the Archdiocese of Baltimore don't go away.

Two of Baltimore's biggest service-oriented organizations, Catholic Charities and St. Vincent de Paul, have thousands of regular volunteers continuing to help during these difficult economic times. In addition, schools also do their part beyond the season.

Sue Alias, volunteer coordinator for St. Vincent de Paul, said volunteers are needed throughout the year.

"They allow us to expand the services we provide throughout the year," she said. "We couldn't do it without them. They bring such a wide range of talents and just a warm presence to people who are in need. The people we serve often say the volunteers brighten their day."

Volunteer opportunities are limited during the holidays, she said, because regular volunteers are afforded the first opportunity to serve.

"The week after Christmas, we tend to need people because (regulars) are on vacation for Christmas break," Alias said.

St. Vincent de Paul posts volunteer information on its website (vincentbaltimore.org), where people seeking to serve regularly can learn more.

"The important thing," Alias said, "is supporting the goals of the program."

People often contribute to St. Vincent de Paul services by preparing food at home.

Patty Newman, volunteer coordinator for Catholic Charities of Baltimore

(catholiccharities-md.org), said that while interest in service spikes during the holiday season, with 15,000 volunteers during the year, she sees the best in people regularly.

"I think people see the call to service as part of their mission," Newman said. "With the regular volunteers, you really connect with them on a personal level. It's hard not to be moved by their giving."

Kerrie Burch-DeLuca, Catholic Charities' director of communications, said that the organization's executive director, William J. McCarthy Jr., often says that the people who are served "are real people with faces we know."

At Calvert Hall College High School, service has been built into the culture, said campus minister Marc Parisi. Calvert Hall is run by the Christian Brothers, whose LaSallian tenets include preferential option for the poor.

"We stress to them that this is who we are," Parisi said. "We've really built a culture of service during the last 10 years. The students know it's not a Christmas thing, but a lifelong thing."

Well-attended optional immersion trips, such as to a Montana reservation, are offered. Students also serve in the inner city, give to a twin school in Africa and take part in the annual March for Life in Washington, which will be held Jan. 23.

"We're really lucky to have a broad base of kids," Parisi said. "We can never give them enough opportunities. They know that at Calvert Hall, we do what's asked of us."