

'COMPASSION IS CONTAGIOUS'

by Karen Doss Bowman

SPECIAL GRANT PROGRAM HELPS BRETHREN CONGREGATIONS AID THE HUNGRY

Living in a nation of privilege and wealth, it's easy for many of us to forget that hungry people live in our neighborhoods. But in Elkhart County, Ind.,

where unemployment reached a staggering rate of nearly 20 percent in the early months of 2009, folks understand that many of their neighbors are struggling to make ends meet.

That's why 11 Brethren congregations in that county rallied to participate in the denomination's Domestic Hunger Matching Grant project, giving them an opportunity to maximize their contributions to the hungry in their community.

"It seemed like a no-brainer to help, especially in this time when there was such a tremendous local need; it was easy to get a response from the congregation," says Bev Weaver, pastor of Goshen City Church of the Brethren, where several members have been laid off from jobs or have had their work hours reduced. "We hope to inspire others [to do the same] . . . There are people who get cynical about Christians. This is a way that says because of our faith we want to do something, and this is one thing that we're doing in the name of Jesus."

The matching grant project, funded by the Church of the

Brethren's Global Food Crisis Fund and the Emergency Disaster Fund, promised to match up to \$500 for any monetary gift made by congregations to local food banks or soup kitchens in early 2009. The 11 churches in Elkhart County, for example, gave donations that—along with the denomination's contribution—added up to more than \$10,000 for nine different local agencies. That has potential for a huge impact in just one struggling community.

"It was great [to receive the gifts], and it's been amazing to watch people continue to donate and try to help those needing assistance," says Ed Swartley, executive director of The Window, a food pantry and community kitchen in Goshen that serves 300 families each month. He says the organization received \$1,425 total from the Goshen City congregation and the denomination. "That goes a long way," he says. "If an average family spends \$100 a week on groceries, that's about 14 families that are served."

According to Howard Royer, manager of the Global Food Crisis Fund, the planners anticipated that about 100 churches would respond to the 10-week challenge. Instead, 357

St. Joseph Community Food Bank director Bob Sidor spends time with young helpers Kassidy Ward and Mackayla Spearman from Onekama (Mich.) Church of the Brethren, which donated \$1,000 to the food bank with the help of the denomination's Domestic Hunger Matching Grant program.

Frances Townsend



OUR LITTLE BIT

"We decided to put a special offering box at the back of our church for two Sundays and allow those who were able to donate to the fund. Our congregation is small and mostly elderly people from the senior center that is across the street from our location. We didn't raise much, but we had a great sense in knowing that we did make a difference and our little bit of contribution was able to go a lot further in the community. We probably would not have done the collection had we not been offered the matching grant, thinking that our congregation was so small that we could not really make a difference." —Anitra Kraus, Water Street Church of the Brethren, Kent, Ohio

churches responded—raising funds that ranged from \$24 to \$3,200. Combined with the matching contributions from the denomination, the net result was \$336,000 in gifts to food banks and soup kitchens throughout the United States.

“It’s who we are in terms of our concern for people who live on the margins that is key,” Royer says. “It sets an example in our communities of what other churches can do as well. Compassion is contagious, and I think to be pacesetters in something like this is a neat way for Brethren to leverage their resources.”

Brethren congregations from coast to coast participated in the project, raising funds through various methods, including collecting special offerings and taking the money out of outreach funds. Members of Sebring (Fla.) Church of the Brethren, for example, turned their loose change into a \$1,000 donation to the Sebring-area New Testament Mission feeding program. The congregation’s “Dime Parade” generated a collection of \$569 in coins within three weeks.

“It was delightful to watch because anyone from age 1 to 91 could be involved,” said Joan Bohrer, vice chair of Sebring’s witness commission. “Everyone brought all of the pennies [and other change] they’ve been saving for years.”

The Mount Morris congregation in Illinois collected more than \$900 in a special offering for the church’s Loaves and Fish food pantry, which distributes about 2,000 pounds of food each week, according to pantry manager Vernon Showalter. With more than 30 volunteers each week, the pantry staff is making efforts to educate the impoverished families they serve about nutrition and how to prepare healthy meals. Additionally, the church sponsors a community garden to help participants learn or refine their growing skills while learning to appreciate the health benefits of eating fresh produce.

Another lesson gleaned from the matching gift project: It doesn’t take a large congregation to make a huge impact. The first congregation to submit its application for the matching gift was Whitestone Church of the Brethren in Tonasket, Wash. Though the congregation’s recorded membership is less than 30, according to the denomination’s *Yearbook*, members raised \$600 for the matching grant project. That translated into an \$1,100 gift for the Tonasket Food Bank.

While most of the projects of the Global Food Crisis Fund are based in developing nations, where hunger and starvation are well documented, Royer says the program considered how to respond effectively and appropriately to the increasing poverty in the United States. This project gave churches a way to mount a compassionate response on a local level—to help the people they know personally who are struggling during this time of severe economic downturn in the US.

“I think it was a situation where churches felt they could participate at a level that allowed them to see the results,” says Eddie Edmonds, chair of the denomination’s Mission and Ministry Board and pastor of Moler Avenue Church of the Brethren in Martinsburg, W.Va. “It’s often hard for people in the pews to grasp a project on a global basis, where we send relief money to the Third World or to [the site of] a natural disaster. It’s much easier for them to relate to their local

SAYING THANKS

The Church of the Brethren Global Food Crisis Fund office has received a steady stream of letters from food banks that were aided by congregations using the matching grant program. Following are a few of their responses:

“Our kitchen serves three meals a day, every day of the year, to the homeless under our roof. On their behalf, God bless!”
—Chris Smith, Lebanon Rescue Mission, Lebanon, Pa., and minister, Midway Church of the Brethren

“We appreciate the support you have given us. We could not continue to meet the needs of the people of Franklin County without folks like you. God bless you.” —Joyce Sigmov, Heavenly Manna Food Bank, Rocky Mount, Va.

“Thank you for helping us help others through our food pantries. Your gift was and is a blessing.” —Gail Kraft, Love INC (Love in the Name of Christ), Muskegon, Mich.


“Without the loving kindness and support of people like the Mountville Church of the Brethren, our ministry plainly speaking would go ‘belly up.’ These disciples of Christ are awesome in our eyes.” —Columbia Food Bank, Mountville, Pa.

“Thank you for your grant. We call this extensions of God’s hands. To be a part of God’s work is the greatest blessing of all.” —Community Meals Ministry, Union City, Ind.

food pantry that’s helping in their community.”

For many congregations, this project was just a boost to continuing efforts to alleviate the effects of hunger in their communities. At Lancaster (Pa.) Church of the Brethren, for example, the congregation has a Hunger and Poverty Team that makes year-round efforts, such as collecting school supplies for homeless children and delivering food once a month to residents of subsidized housing.

Edmonds and Royer hope the matching gift project will inspire other congregations to make similar, ongoing efforts to serve the needy people in their communities and throughout the world as a response to Christ’s call to serve “the least of these.”

“Our hope,” Edmonds says, “is that this project will foster the relationships of congregations to their local food banks, that it will raise awareness in the communities of the great need that is there in our own neighborhoods, and that it will sensitize congregations to the continuing plight around the world of global hunger—so that the next time those global food Sundays come along, people will be generous in their support of that ministry.” 

Karen Doss Bowman is a freelance writer based in Bridgewater, Va. She is a member of Sunrise Church of the Brethren in Harrisonburg.