

Love Thy Neighbor

St. Mark Church, Rochester Hills, MI

Knowing that poverty is a cycle and education plays an important part in breaking the cycle, a few of our parishioners at St. Mark Church pondered on how to help the elementary school two driveways west of the church. St. Mark has always had a good relationship with the school; we use each other's parking lots when needed.

With the poor economy and educational budget cuts in Michigan a meeting was set up with the principal in June of 2011. At the meeting, we as a parish community were welcomed to come in and assist the teachers in math, reading or science for an hour a week. Another meeting was set for August where the principal would come and answer questions at the church.



Sign-up sheets were made. Bulletin articles were created and announcements were made. Initially we found four tutoring volunteers. That has now grown to six and all are faithful to their work. Working with the children is most rewarding for the volunteer. This is a brand new program at our church, if only one person volunteered that would have been fine, that would be about 38 volunteer hours. But six faithful volunteers touching 25 children each week is remarkable.



Hunger is also part of the poverty cycle. The principal discussed various programs his school was involved in – the supplemental government breakfast and lunch program was brought up. Sixty elementary students receive breakfast and lunch daily. We thought about shopping weekly for one, possibly two, families. We found that the local university would donate their food to this endeavor on Fridays. Four families were given to us by the principal after he had asked permission for us to contact them. They all live right behind the church, and truly are our neighbors.

Our small committee meets periodically and we are planning to continue the food program this summer, supplementing breakfast and lunch. As soon as school is out we will use volunteer shoppers and continue to deliver food to our neighbors.



How to get started:

1. Decide you want to get started. You don't need the entire parish. A few interested persons can be enough to get you moving.
2. Make contact with a nearby school principal right after summer vacation begins. If the principal is not too keen on the idea there are plenty of school principals that would love to have you.
3. Find out what times are best for volunteering. Our principal gave us the optimal schedule which was every hour of the day every day of the week and what subjects were scheduled. Folks can volunteer for their favorite subjects at a time convenient for them.
4. Make sure that the volunteers know that consistency is necessary for children. If you are there on Monday at 2PM be faithful to Monday at 2PM. Children, at risk or not, need consistency.
5. Check in with the principal and the volunteers periodically.
6. Once you have a relationship you can ask about providing food. Since the principal knows me it was easy to explain what we wanted to do and he knew I would respect his families (that have become our families when we talk).
7. Every August we plan to have an informal meeting so that new folks can be taken over to the school and show them the ins and outs of navigating the school.
8. Would you like to provide food to some of the families? Check with the principal after a relationship has been established.
9. If you have a local university they should have a food service. Call the food service and see if they donate food. Ask if you can be in a rotation for picking up food.
10. Make sure that someone can pick up every single time on time. We pick up, drivers meet at the church, we sort the food and off we go to deliver.

Ruth Yavornitzky