

**Mission: the  
heartbeat of  
the church**

IN THIS ISSUE:

**1**  
*Changing the Lives of  
Mexico's Poorest*

**5**  
*Harvesters BackSnack  
Ministry*

**8**  
*Making Space: Parish  
Sewing Room*

**11**  
*Companion  
Relationships*

**Changing the Lives of  
Mexico's Poorest**

BY HANNAH WILDER

In a city where 80,000 children do not attend school and 6,000 children live on the street, Tijuana's Dorcas House (<http://www.dorcashousefriends.org/>), a ministry of the Diocese of San Diego, houses, feeds, educates, and loves the most ostracized of this marginal population: the children whose parents are in prison.

During the Episcopal Church's 2009 General Convention, Terri Mathes, then president of Dorcas House, spent valuable networking hours with representatives from Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD) (<http://www.er-d.org/>).

Instead of merely caring for the casualties of Tijuana's violence and poverty, Mathes wanted to go to the root of the problem and break the cycle that lands many children in orphanages, or in prison with their parents.

Without resources and at least one parent in prison, most of these children ended up on the streets. Dorcas House is the only foster home in Tijuana that accepts these children.

"The goal was to leverage ERD's extensive experience in effecting international social change to create real change for the people connected to Dorcas House," said Mathes.

These conversations laid the groundwork for innovative collaboration that is now beginning to take shape in our diocese.

Under the capable, loving guidance of Tijuana native Sylvia Laborin, Dorcas House children receive shelter, three warm meals a day, medical attention, psychological therapy and education. Dorcas House staff members ensure that every single child is enrolled in school, and they

provide after-school tutoring sessions.

The children received such high marks that teachers began sending other school children to the foster home for help with their homework.

Dorcas House doesn't stop there. They have organized and hosted parenting classes for people who don't have the skills or knowledge to care for their children, rehabilitating them as parents so that families can be reunited.

This success demonstrated that Dorcas House had the capability to reach people in the community, hold classes, teach skills and show results. These are all the ingredients necessary to build a successful microcredit program.

### **MicroCredit**

Enter La Maestra Community Health Centers, (<http://www.lamaestra.org/>) an award winning non-profit in San Diego that provides microcredit loans to low-income women with an entrepreneurial spirit.

Very simply, microcredit is tiny self-employment business loans made to the world's poorest people, especially to women. These business loans usually start at \$55, and when the first loan has been fully paid, there is an oppor-

tunity to borrow more. The borrowers are required to invest the money immediately in an income-generating activity.

Strict qualifications must be met before a person is admitted to the lending program. Once admitted, regular attendance, punctual payments, and inscrutable records are a must.

Groups of five women from the same neighborhood form a group and hold each other accountable for repaying their loans. All members contribute to the group credit rating, which is tainted by late payments, making the whole group less eligible for future loans. If one woman has to miss a meeting, she must send her payment with another group member.

The weekly meetings, which last about an hour, also provide the women a chance to discuss issues, socialize, and become friends. They build a community among themselves and share stories about their business ventures, often problem-solving with one another and helping each other through difficulty.

Most women report that the thing they like best about the program is not the money; it's the friendships and their newfound sense of self-respect. They say things like,

"My husband respects me more," or "My children ask my opinion," or "I am somebody now."

The microcredit program gained traction as churches began sponsoring people within the geographic bounds of our diocese. The idea to take La Maestra's proven microcredit program to Tijuana where it could reach untapped, capable entrepreneurial spirits was a logical next step. Using the facilities and staff of Dorcas House, La Maestra could start a microcredit group in Tijuana.

### **Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD)**

ERD supports unique local, long-term initiatives that address poverty, hunger, disease, economic development and disaster response. What better organization to head the new microcredit program at Dorcas House?

In August 2010, the Matheses met with a representative of ERD, the Anglican bishop of the Diocese of Western Mexico, the director and board of Dorcas House, and the director of La Maestra Microcredit Program to discuss the details of the program and hammer out the proposal to ERD for seed money.

"This partnership is the kind of thing Episcopal Relief and Development stands for," said

Karla Avila, representative of ERD. “Long-term, sustainable change begins with programs like this. A tiny loan can represent a life-changing opportunity for women and their families.”

Just this summer, ERD awarded the grant for the start of the microcredit program and trainings for the staff of Dorcas House have been underway ever since. The training to run the program is extensive and continues even as the first loans were made.

“The training for the program is still in progress,” said staff psychologist at Dorcas House, Victor Esparza. “We feel confident that this microcredit program will open new doors for those who are dedicated to making a better life.”

Twelve loans for \$55 each were administered the last week of August, officially commencing this innovative partnership involving the Diocese of San Diego, ERD, and Dorcas House.

“We are cautiously optimistic,” said Bishop Mathes, “about the possibility of real change coming out of our tiny foster home in Tijuana. If we can change just one life, we will have succeeded, but it is my hope that we change an entire community and from there, who knows? Maybe we can change the world.”

**Hannah Wilder** is the director of communications for the Diocese of San Diego.

### Resources

- Dorcas House: <http://www.dorcashousefriends.org/>
- Dorcas House videos: <http://www.dorcashousefriends.org/videos>
- Episcopal Relief and Development: <http://www.er-d.org/>
- ERD Creating Economic Opportunities: [http://www.er-d.org/Create\\_Economic\\_Opportunities/](http://www.er-d.org/Create_Economic_Opportunities/)
- Kiva.org: <http://www.kiva.org/>
- La Maestra Community Health Centers: <http://www.lamaestra.org/>
- Microcredit: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microcredit>
- Top 10 Lessons From a Microlending Pioneer: [http://www.wired.com/techbiz/startups/news/2007/05/microlending\\_tips](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/startups/news/2007/05/microlending_tips)
- Small Change: [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/09/20/small\\_](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/09/20/small_)

[change\\_does\\_microlending\\_actually\\_fight\\_poverty/](#)

## Editor's Letter

### ***"Can you hear the heartbeat? Mission, mission, mission."***

Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop of The Episcopal Church, used this metaphor at opening sermon at the Church's 76th General Convention. More recently, this phrase served as the framework for the October 2011 "Everyone, Everywhere" (<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/ee11.htm>) conference as presenters and participants explored the question "What gates and walls need to be opened in order to take up the work God sends us to do?"

In the opening sermon of the conference, Jefferts Schori preached, "We have been sent here to discover how to send others more effectively - so that each one can go out into the world to heal and reconcile brokenness. There are times when that work can feel as hopeless as trying to collect all the sand and rock at the base of these mountains, and put it back up there on the mountain. Yet we're here because we believe God works even through erosion and what looks like the destruction of creation. It is the destruction of human communities and ecologi-

cal systems that has brought us here, hoping to find ways of healing."

In our November and December content, Vestry Papers shares stories of congregations and dioceses large and small engaged in the work of healing and reconciling brokenness. Articles include:

- "Changing the Lives of Mexico's Poorest" by Hannah Wilder tells the story, through text and video, of the Diocese of San Diego's Dorcas House ministry in Tijuana, Mexico including their recent partnership with two other organizations to bring a microcredit program to low-income women.
- "Harvesters BackSnack Ministry" by Fran Wheeler shares one parish's experience with a Diocese of Kansas initiative to combat hunger. Working with Harvesters, a member of the Feeding America network of food banks, the local school district, and other community groups, her small congregation helps feed 305 students each week
- "Making Space: Parish sewing room invites come-as-you-can participation" by Karin Hamilton represents a dream come true. By transforming a former nursery school room into a dedicated workroom, congregation members now have a place to come together to work on their many sewing and related work projects done in support of the parish's mission partnerships.
- "Companion Relationships: From Parish Lenten Program to a Diocesan Partnership" by Pat McCaughan tells the story of how the Diocese of Los Angeles' companion relationship with the Holy Land grew out of a 2004 Lenten program at an Episcopal Church in San Gabriel.
- Available in both English and Spanish, Ariel Miller's "From Casseroles to Congress" shares how Episcopalians in Ohio have joined forces with other non-profit and civic organizations to ensure people who qualify for Federal safety net programs have access to benefits available to them.

- Daniel Trudeau's "Welcome Neighbor" tells the story of two congregations whose work with Episcopal Migration Ministries is enriching the lives of both the resettled families and the volunteers who offer welcome, friendship, and support.
- "Strengthening Communities from Within" by Faith Rowold showcases the power of partnership and the impact an education can have on students, their families, and their communities.

ECF Vital Practices, please consider adding a link to ECF Vital Practices to your website. Here's how: Using your websites 'add a link' tool, insert our full URL – <http://www.ecfvp.org/>

Each article includes links to resources and/or videos designed to help a congregation learn more about the ministry described in the article.

Faithfully,

Nancy

**NANCY DAVIDGE**

Editor, *ECF Vital Practices*

PS: To make it easier for congregational leaders to find the resources offered through

# Harvesters BackSnack Ministry

BY FRAN WHEELER

*"Thank you for the food you gave me."*

- Edwin

Hunger is not just a Third World problem. Hunger does not discriminate. Young and elderly, black and white, male and female... the many faces of hunger are different, but the pain and the need are the same. For thousands in our community, hunger is one of life's daily realities.

In the Diocese of Kansas, congregations large and small are helping to feed hungry children by providing them with nutritious and easy-to-prepare food to take home in a backpack on weekends and school vacations when other resources are not available. BackPacks, a program offered by Feeding America, is a partnership between the Harvesters food bank, a participating school, and local corporate, civic, or religious organizations. In the Diocese of Kansas, the Episcopal Hunger Relief Network (EHRN)(<http://www.episcopalcommunity.org/pages/backsnack.html>) partners with Harvesters, Episcopal Community Services (ECS)(<http://www.episcopalcommunity.org/>), elementary and middle schools, and Episcopal parishes.

This has been an extremely successful ministry from many aspects. At St. Aidan's, we started out with a lot of unknowns and have watched it succeed with a lot of patience, organization, many volunteers, and many prayers.

## Getting Started

Our first task was to get schools on board with the program. Working with the school district we were able to achieve the support needed to promote this program to Title I schools within the Olathe School District. During our first year (2008-2009) five of the ten eligible schools committed to try this program for their students. St. Aidan's partnered with New Journey (another church in Olathe) with St. Aidan's providing backpacks to three schools with 90 students and New Journey two schools with 60 students; in all 150 students. By the end of our first year St. Aidan's was serving six schools and 345 students.

This year, there are seven participating elementary schools with a total of 305 students. St. Aidan's is sponsoring four schools and 165 students. New Journey is sponsoring three and 140 students.

There are another two elementary schools and one middle school in the district participating in a separate sponsored BackSnack program.

Our second task was to find a location to store the food Harvesters provides for the program. While we were initially unsuccessful in our request to have the food stored within the school district's space, we were blessed to have St. Francis in Stillwell come forward and offer space in their church. After the completion of our first year, we were able to make arrangements with the school district to receive deliveries and store the BackSnack Food at their Food Production Center Building.

Our third task was to order the supplies needed to run this ministry. Shelving was required for food storage; large plastic tubs were needed to haul the backpacks (we chose 45 gallon tubs with wheels); a dolly for transporting tubs between cars, vans, and buildings; additional plastic bags were needed to provide extra support; Clorox wipes for sanitizing the backpacks; and rubber gloves for volunteers to wear while sanitizing the back-

packs. In all a supply budget for about \$650.00 was needed to get us up and running; funds from Episcopal Community Services and the Episcopal Hunger Relief Network covered these costs.

The next task was to organize deliveries, pickups, and packing, including putting out a call for volunteers. Initially, coordinating deliveries with Harvesters was a challenge, however we found that patience and flexibility were the best way to overcome that challenge. We also learned that it was simplest to ask each congregation (St. Aidan's and New Journey) to coordinate their own schedule for filling and delivering the backpacks.

### **Volunteers**

In our congregation, volunteers from St. Aidan's and Rockhurst College keep the BackSnack ministry running smoothly. Tasks range from receiving the food at St. Francis, to printing and posting the monthly packing and delivery schedules, picking up and delivering the BackSnack tubs, cleaning the returned backpacks, and then filling them with food on Wednesday evenings.

During our first year, we received packing assistance from volunteers who heard about our program outside of our parish walls. When we added a sixth school that first February, one of our parish-

ioners inquired with St. Paul's AME Church to see if they might be interested in joining us as this new school was located just a few blocks away from them. They were very excited and had six volunteers assist us during the last three months of that year.

One of the routine tasks done in our packing was opening extra plastic bags to place the food in prior to adding it to the packs. After we discovered how time consuming this was, a parishioner recruited a group of people at the senior residence where she lives to do this task for us. They meet weekly for social time and bag opening time and then drop the bags off in time for packing.

On a given week, we estimate that there are about 30-35 volunteers that in one way or another participate with this ministry.

### **Extras**

Through additional, occasional funding from Episcopal Community Services and the Episcopal Hunger Relief Network, we are able to provide extra items, such as mini boxes of cereal, fruit snacks, shampoo, and toothpaste purchased through Harvesters. The congregation also runs a H.U.G.S. collection, inviting people to donate hats, underwear, gloves, and scarves that are distributed to the children dur-

ing the winter months.

Our first year, a church in Tipton, Missouri heard about our collection and sent about 200 hand knitted hats for the children. We've since added holiday meals at Thanksgiving and Christmas to a family from each school and offer Christmas gifts through our Adopt -A- Family ministry, in which gifts are donated to one family at each school.

### **Building Community**

Ruth Nelson, the Olathe School district's assistant director of community development and my initial contact with the schools, was an excellent resource. Through her commitment and support I was able to keep the schools working together and providing support amongst themselves for distributing the packs for this program. It was through her efforts that we were able to eventually use space within the school district's food production center for the deliveries from Harvesters.

This ministry has been well received. In its first year, the Olathe School District provided certificates to New Journey, St. Francis, and St. Aidan's recognizing our efforts within the School District's community. The Olathe Human Relations Commission presented St. Aidan's with an Organization Award for the BackSnack Program, and in

addition, I was presented with a Humanitarian Award. These two awards were in recognition for making a lasting difference in enriching both human rights and diversity within Olathe.

Community recognition aside, one of the most important responses from this program has been the sense of community among all involved. Without Harvesters and their many contributors and sponsors, Episcopal Community Services, the Episcopal Hunger Relief Network, and the many volunteers involved who have contributed their support either financially, through the gift of time, or other various contributions, this program would not exist.

The thank you notes received from the students are heartfelt. The students are extremely grateful and look forward to their weekly packs. I've heard from the counselors and nurses at the schools that students often remind them when the packs are needed earlier in the week due to an early dismissal.

This program continues to meet a need in our community as we continue to see an increasing number of families with hunger needs. We have developed relationships that did not exist before, and we are discovering additional outreach opportunities that just seem to grow within this new circle of rela-

tionships. This ministry has truly been a blessing to our wonderful children, and has not only reached out to them, but to many within our community. With this ministry, St. Aidan's is truly upholding its mission: to make disciples by proclaiming Christ as Lord, and by making a difference in our community.

**Fran Wheeler** is a deacon at St. Aidan's Church in Olathe, Kansas. She also serves on the diocese's outreach committee.

### Resources

- Backpack Program: <http://www.harvesters.org/Link.asp?IdS=0004F1-38C96A0&Url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Efeedingamerica%2Eorg> and <http://www.harvesters.org/WhoWeAre/Index.asp?x=020|030|030&~=>
- Episcopal Community Services: <http://www.episcopalcommunity.org/>
- Episcopal Hunger Relief Network: <http://www.episcopalcommunity.org/pages/back-snack.html>
- FeedingAmerica video - <http://youtu.be/9Hw3e--ECEk>
- Feeding America website:

<http://feedingamerica.org/>

- Harvesters: <http://www.harvesters.org/>

## Making Space

BY KARIN HAMILTON

“Phenomenal!” That was the word that parishioners of St. Ann’s, Old Lyme, Connecticut, kept saying as they visited the new sewing room in their undercroft. A converted former nursery school room, it is now a self-service center for sewing and related work in support of the parish’s mission partnerships.

“My dream is to get people to work on these projects anytime, if they have one day a week, or two, they can come here and work and still have community,” said Carole Lamourine, a long-time parishioner who spearheaded the project. “If you want the camaraderie of the parish, you can come even an hour a month.” She said that some people take work home and there was enough variety so that those with arthritis in their hands could also contribute. “People like doing things,” Lamourine said.

Windows and a sliding glass door make the sewing room light and bright. There are workstations for sewing and ironing, tables for cutting, and storage bins above and below counters. Among the work projects set out for visitors were quilts in various stages of creation

- from bolts of fabric to packages of 20 ready-to-assemble squares; stacks of fabric bags created to hold knitted items; knit caps; knit cotton washcloths; hand-hemmed receiving blankets; a bin of embroidered linen and lace items; and a bias tape-making machine. Hangers around the room displayed different-sized dresses made from simple patterns for girls to wear in warm climates.

“Each of these projects has grown from when we’ve been asked for something [from a mission partner],” Lamourine explained. “St. Ann’s needs to be able to sustain its relationships.”

St. Ann’s has a partnership with a group of nuns who serve at a neo-natal clinic in the barrio of Las Florres, outside San Pedro, in the Dominican Republic. Anne Haddad, the parishioner who coordinates the layette ministry, said the parish sends six sets there every two months. Each set includes a quilt (for bed padding), receiving blankets, and knit washcloths, plus cloth diapers, onesies, and other requested items that are purchased with donated funds. Haddad sees the sewing

opportunities as a “great way to get people involved.” She’s taken on laundering the finished quilts at home and hemming receiving blankets.

People also sew backpacks and write curriculum, to support two week-long summer camps for Haitian children, one in Port-au-Prince and one in a batey - on a sugarcane plantation - in the Dominican Republic. The parish usually sends a group annually to visit the city and the bateys. Others, overwhelmingly female, knit caps for the Seaman’s Institute; make cloth “ditty bags” to hold the caps; knit prayer shawls; make “Little Dresses for Africa,” from pillowcases and simple patterns; and make other dresses for girls. In addition the parish sends donated clothing and new school supplies to Holy Trinity Cathedral and School in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. And, they’ve also sent kits for Haitian priests that include a ceramic chalice and paten and altar linens, and are exploring how best to make and pack home Communion kits.

Lamourine also embroiders linens and makes lace, using digital

patterns. Last year St. Ann's made a set of altar linens for a small backcountry church in Ghana when their associate rector the Rev. Stephanie Johnson travelled there.

"It's absolutely astounding the things they are doing," said the Rev. Canon Bob Miner, interim rector. His wife, Glee, has been very involved in the sewing projects. She helped clean and ready the room and enjoys the sewing work.

"This is an outpouring not only of talent but of God coming through their handiwork and prayer," Miner said. Before the room downstairs was scrubbed clean and set up, sewing material had been stored in cabinets in the parish hall and taken out and returned whenever there was a common workday. The new arrangement means no more having to put material back, and no need to schedule the room for sewing projects. Getting the room ready meant hours of scrubbing and organizing by Lamourine, Glee Miner, and others.

There are about 25 people in the parish who participate in this kind of work in some way, whether from home or at the church. In the new space, there have been up to six at a time working there together, but it's more likely to be two or three.

Now over 70, Carol Lamourine was born and raised at St. Ann's, starting when it was Black Hall Mission Station, served by clergy from Old Saybrook and Niantic. Sewing has been her life work and her joy. While her enthusiasm and drive remain strong, she says that her hands don't work as well as they used to. And a knee replacement that didn't go well is now affecting her legs and especially her feet. She's hoping the new, attractive room will help expand the current participation and insure that the work continues when she's no longer able to lead it. The new bright space, with its organization, efficiency, and opportunities for service and socialization, give her tremendous hope. "They just need to see this place," she said.

**Karin Hamilton**, the director of communication and media for the Diocese of Connecticut is a parishioner at St. Ann's.

### Resources

- Ecclesiastical & Church Embroidery Patterns: <http://www.needlenthread.com/2006/06/ecclesiastical-church-embroidery.html>
- Episcopal Medical Missions Foundation/Dominican Republic: <http://www.emmf.com/dominican.htm>

- Little Dresses for Africa: <http://www.littledressesforafrica.org/blog/>
- Seamen's Church Institute Christmas at Sea Knitting Ministry: <http://www.seamenschurch.org/christmas-at-sea>
- The Altar Guild Resource for the Diocese of Rhode Island: <http://rhodeislandaltars.org/category/crochet-patterns/>
- The Community of the Transfiguration: [http://www.ctsisters.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=57:centro-buen-pastor&catid=36:ministries&Itemid=64](http://www.ctsisters.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=57:centro-buen-pastor&catid=36:ministries&Itemid=64)

# Companion Relationships

BY PAT MCCAUGHAN

It has taken about seven years for the dream of a school in the Galilean town of Shefa'amr to blossom into the recently dedicated Episcopal Cultural Center—but that's just one part of "this wonderful story," according to the Rev. Fuad Dagher, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Shefa'amr.

For Dagher, the story is also about the wonders God accomplishes "when people of good will, no matter the distance and geographic place, stand together, side by side and hand in hand," he said.

"This is one of God's wonders and miracles in our lives and we are blessed by what has been done," he added.

The center, dedicated June 11, 2011, is adjacent to the church and includes educational and meeting space, an art gallery and workshop space, and has become a unifying force for the entire community of Palestinian Arabs who are citizens of Israel, and are Christians, Muslims and Druze, Dagher said during a July 15 telephone interview from Ramallah, where he was helping to train diocesan youth as summer camp leaders.

"This wonderful story goes back to a partnership relationship with the people in the Diocese of Los Angeles through Bishop Jon Bruno and Mary Bruno, through Fr. Denis O'Pray when he was rector of the Church of Our Saviour in San Gabriel, and through Sue and Sandy Smock.

"With the help and support of your diocese, we managed to buy a piece of land adjacent to the church, starting a project for ministry and service to the whole community of Shefa'amr," he said.

## The Beginning

This companion relationship grew out of a 2004 Lenten program, "Journey to Jerusalem: Then & Now," inspired by O'Pray, which led to a parish-to-parish relationship between the San Gabriel and Shefa'amr congregations.

Diocesan Bishop Jon Bruno got involved, which helped lead to a companion diocese relationship between the dioceses of Los Angeles and Jerusalem.

And that led to a creative partnership between the dioceses and congregations. Over time, the

partnership has prompted more than 500 Episcopalians from the diocese to make pilgrimages to the Holy Land, including some 80 clergy, according to Sandy Smock, a member of the Bishop's Commission on the Middle East.

In 2004, during the time of the Church of Our Savior's first pilgrimage visit, the property next door to St. Paul's [in Shefa'amr] became available when the owners died.

"After an extended period of prayer and thoughtful exploration, an agreement was reached to purchase this property in a three-way partnership between the Diocese of Jerusalem, the Diocese of Los Angeles, and the Church of Our Saviour. The purpose of this purchase was to enable St. Paul's to grow and expand its much-needed service and leadership to the community," recalled Sue Smock.

## Bringing the Project to Fruition

Bishop Jon Bruno, who attended the Shefa'amr dedication along with his spouse, Mary Bruno, credited Dagher with bringing the project to fruition. The Los Angeles diocese and the Church of

Our Saviour each contributed \$70,000 toward the initial \$150,000 land purchase, he said.

In Israel, Dagher built relationships between all the Christian faiths, the Muslims, and the Druze and raised \$120,000 from the local community to renovate the property into a magnificent cultural center.

There are some 200 Episcopalians in Shefa'amr, located about eight miles from the Mediterranean Sea at the entrance to Galilee. About 60 percent of the city's 35,000 people are Muslim; 26 percent Christian and 14 percent Druze, a Muslim sect, all of whom live in peace together.

"Culturally, this wasn't anything anyone had ever done before," said Sandy Smock. "Fuad's steadfastness made it happen. He stayed with it. They'd had a school at the church a long time ago and then it was torn down and a parish hall was built. He (Fuad) just decided he'd start with a school and over time it evolved into a new idea, and here we are."

The dedication included a "spirit-filled" Pentecost worship service at which O'Pray preached. Afterwards, a local Boy and Girl Scout drum corps led a procession from the church around the town,

ending at the gates of the new Episcopal Cultural Center.

Bishop Suheil Dawani of the Diocese of Jerusalem led the ceremony, joined by Sheik Josef of the Druze community, Dagher, and Bruno. Local civic leaders spoke, and a concert choir and orchestra of young people provided music.

"It was incredible for me to see all our friends there on the spot, enjoying wonderful music and praying for the community of Shefa'amr," Dagher said. "We've already started doing programs and concerts at the center. One of the things the building will be used for includes art galleries, music and handcrafts workshops, and there's a wonderful space in front of the building that we will use for concerts and sacred music and other kinds of performances."

Dagher has already formed a committee made up of church and community members to create additional programs and offerings, including a possible preschool program.

The center has become a unifying symbol for everyone, he added. "Already we've been receiving calls from people from the town hall and municipality who want to bring guests and visitors to show them the space and how it was

renovated." "I feel very proud to know it has become an important spot for the city of Shefa'amr."

Sandy Smock called the cultural center and Dagher "a wonderful success story."

"We continue to send pilgrimage after pilgrimage, more than any other diocese," Smock said. "My hope is that other bishops will take Jon Bruno's lead and incorporate this as part of their outreach. The Diocese of Jerusalem has a special place within Christianity and the Anglican Communion."

Dagher agreed, sharing that while the Episcopal Cultural Center project is one way to "strengthen our presence and our ministry and Christian call of mission in the Holy Land," through it strangers became like family. So much so that he and wife Hanai invited the Smocks to be godparents to their daughter, Reggina, now five years old — "a great privilege," Sandy Smock said.

"We said this is the way we could thank them for all they've done, to have them be part of our family," Dagher said.

"It's a modest gesture to tell them that we love you and through them we express our many thanks to so many people, those who

have come on pilgrimage. We still want to ask you to come, and visit and see and experience and meet the local Christians, the living stones.”

He added, “For us in the land of the holy one, we need to strengthen our presence, because our presence, whether we like it or not, is threatened and our numbers are dwindling, and this is very serious. I was convinced and am still convinced we need to build up relationships, church-to-church relationships in order to help both sides, your people and our people, to know about each other and learn about each other in a mutual kind of awareness.”

**The Rev. Pat McCaughan**, is the convening chairperson of the Diocese of Los Angeles’ program group on communication and public affairs and senior correspondent for *The Episcopal News*.

### Resources

- Vestry Resource Guide: <http://www.episcopalfoundation.org/tools-and-programs/leadership-tools/the-vestry-resource-guide>
- Building Relationships with the Parishes and Institutions of the Diocese of Jerusalem: [http://www.AFEDJ.org/Relationships\\_final\\_apr\\_10.pdf](http://www.AFEDJ.org/Relationships_final_apr_10.pdf)
- Children’s Lenten Series from the Diocese of Jerusalem: <http://middleeast.ladiocese.org/childrens-lenten-series.html>
- Churches for Middle East Peace: <http://www.cmep.org/>
- Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East: <http://www.j-diocese.org/>
- Pilgrimage Opportunities: <http://middleeast.ladiocese.org/pilgrimage.html>
- Advent Series from the Diocese of Jerusalem: <http://middleeast.ladiocese.org/advent-series.html>
- American Friends of the Diocese of Jerusalem: <http://www.AFEDJ.org/>

# From Casseroles to Congress

BY ARIEL MILLER

Ohio Episcopalians have found a way to boost low-wage neighbors out of poverty even if their own parish budgets are shrinking. The secret is recruiting volunteers to help people complete tax returns and applications for public benefits like food stamps.

Here are just a few of the impacts:

- The Rev. Arthur Mills completed a tax return with a Methodist church secretary in Dayton. She used the resulting tax credits to move her children out of a dangerous neighborhood and into a better school district.
- A single mother of two was struggling to juggle work, child-care, and classes at a community college. She earned only \$17,000 in 2009, but Christ Episcopal Church Dayton Rector John Paddock helped her complete her tax return to qualify for over \$9,000 in refunds and tax credits. She was able to cut back her work hours and enroll full-time to move faster towards her RN degree, the passport to better wages.

- Christ Episcopal Church parishioner Charley Stough uses his laptop to set up an impromptu tax office in a booth at his favorite bar. A waitress sat down with her W-2's, brushing off his enquiries about the bruises on her face. But when they got to the screen showing she'd be getting a refund of thousands of dollars, she stood up, filled with emotion, and cried "GOOD! Now I can leave the bastard!"

Daily breakthroughs like these put real faces on the data released by the Census Bureau in November showing that federal tax credits and public benefits are especially valuable to families with children. In 2010 the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) reduced the proportion of children living in poverty from 22.4% to 18.2%. Without food stamps (now called SNAP), 21.2% of American children would have fallen below the poverty line.

Last winter Bread for the World estimated that federal tax credits would put \$10 billion into the budgets of low-wage American families this year, twice what all US food

charities will raise in contributions. "Refundable" tax credits like the EITC operate as a negative income tax, and can put thousands of new dollars into a family's budget. The maximum EITC benefit for a family with three or more children is now \$5,751.

Congress' 1996 welfare reform included food stamps, Medicaid, and child care vouchers as "work supports" to close the gap between entry-level wages and the rising cost of living. These programs have proved increasingly crucial to keeping working families above water. The average Ohioan's wages have gone down \$7,000 since 2000. One point three million Ohioans have lost employer-provided health insurance, and costs for food, rent, utilities, gasoline, and health care have shot up.

Recruited by the Episcopal Community Services Foundation (ECSF), Episcopal churches in Cincinnati and Columbus were among the first sites to use the Ohio Benefit Bank free web-based software designed for the National Council of Churches to enable volunteers to fill out tax returns and public benefits applications.

Launched in January 2006, the Ohio Benefit Bank has connected families with over \$555 million to meet essential needs.

The timing was providential. As the recession hit, plant closings from Dayton to Martin's Ferry pushed the state into crisis as thousands more people lost manufacturing jobs with benefits. Episcopal volunteers have been able to help families maximize their tax credits and enroll in food stamps and Medicaid, freeing up scarce dollars to use for rent or mortgage.

The Benefit Bank is now live in ten states, but 80% of the impact has been achieved in Ohio due to the unique implementation strategy designed by the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks in training over 5,000 people – most of them volunteers – in churches and grassroots nonprofits.

The Benefit Bank relies on trained counselors, most of whom are volunteers. Training provides counselors with the skills and knowledge needed to assist clients with taxes, benefits, and FAFSA as well as best practices for setting expectations with clients, maintaining privacy, handling sensitive questions, and reviewing follow-up procedures.

Training for counselors and access to the web-based software is free. Public and private grants keep

the software up to date. Since its launch in 2004, the Benefit Bank has added several new benefits. In 2010, for example, ECSF recruited churches to offer clinics showing students how to use the Benefit Bank to complete tax returns and the dreaded FAFSA form (the gateway for all financial aid) in one sitting.

The Benefit Bank has added self-serve tax and benefits applications, making it even easier for volunteers to help people navigate the questions, which are written at a fourth-grade level. The Benefit Bank has a live help desk.

Many states have launched online self-serve application forms for public benefits. Churches with Internet access can easily add tax and benefits assistance to their food pantry or GED class. Volunteers can use their own laptops. If your state isn't part of the Benefit Bank, the IRS's VITA program or the AARP can train your parishioners to assist people with tax returns.

In Ohio, Episcopalians' growing understanding of the impact of public benefits has lifted our focus from casseroles to Congress. Both Ohio dioceses passed resolutions in 2010 calling on governments to preserve nutrition funding as they tackle

deficit reduction.

In the past year, grassroots hunger programs have collected thousands of first-hand stories illustrating an appalling range of Ohioans who no longer earn enough to meet their families' basic needs. This avalanche of stories helped prevent the state legislature from cutting funds for food in a year when most other human services were slashed.

We're now trying to prevent the U.S. Senate from approving a House-passed bill that would cut federal funding for emergency food by 20%, even as food pantries are struggling to meet yet another year of double-digit rises in the number of people turning to them for aid.

Great cooks in your parish should continue fixing those scrumptious end-of-the-month community dinners. But if you have parishioners who like people and enjoy the Internet, mobilize them! With 90 minutes effort they could lift a family into stability for a whole year.

**Ariel Miller** is the Executive Director of the Episcopal Community Services Foundation in the Diocese of Southern Ohio.

To learn more about the benefits outreach strategy or to volunteer

contact MaryJo Woodburn at the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks: [Maryjo@oashf.org](mailto:Maryjo@oashf.org).

### Resources

- AARP, Tax-Aide Program: <http://www.aarp.org/money/taxes/info-11-2011/tax-aide-income-tax-returns-oh.html>
- Bread for the World: <http://www.bread.org/>
- The Benefit Bank: [www.thebenefitbank.com](http://www.thebenefitbank.com)
- Earned Income Tax Credit: <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96406,00.html>
- Vestry Resource Guide: <http://www.episcopalfoundation.org/tools-and-programs/leadership-tools/the-vestry-resource-guide>
- IRS VITA Program: <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=184243,00.html>
- Episcopal Community Services Foundation, Diocese of Southern Ohio: <http://www.ecsfsouthernohio.org/>
- The Ohio Benefit Bank: <http://www.thebenefitbank.com/tbboh>
- Second Harvest Foodbanks: <http://www.oashf.org/>
- US Census Bureau: The Research Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2010: [www.census.gov/hhes/povmeas/methodology/supplemental/research/Short\\_ResearchSPM2010.pdf](http://www.census.gov/hhes/povmeas/methodology/supplemental/research/Short_ResearchSPM2010.pdf)

# De las comidas al Congreso

POR ARIEL MILLER

Los miembros de la Iglesia Episcopal del estado de Ohio encontraron una manera de ayudar a sacar de la pobreza a sus vecinos de bajos ingresos incluso cuando los presupuestos de sus parroquias se están encogiendo. El secreto es reclutar voluntarios para ayudar a la gente a completar sus planillas de impuestos y solicitudes de beneficios públicos, como cupones de alimentos.

Las iglesias participantes se enteraron que los programas federales de red de seguridad social – en riesgo a causa de la reducción del déficit presupuestario – ahora contribuyen mucho a que las familias de Estados Unidos sobrevivan la recesión.

A continuación, algunos de los impactos:

- La Rev. Arthur Mills completó una planilla impositiva con el secretario de una Iglesia Metodista de Dayton. Ella empleó los créditos impositivos resultantes para sacar a sus hijos de un barrio peligroso e inscribirlos en un distrito escolar mejor.
- Una madre que cría sola a sus dos hijos estaba haciendo verdaderos malabarismos para lidiar con su trabajo, el cuidado de sus hijos y las clases en una universidad comunitaria. En 2007 ganó sólo US\$17,000, pero John Paddock, el rector de la Iglesia Christ Episcopal de Dayton, la ayudó a completar su planilla impositiva y cumplió con los requisitos para obtener reembolsos y créditos impositivos de más de US\$9,000. Ella pudo reducir sus horas de trabajo e inscribirse a tiempo completo para obtener su título de enfermera registrada más rápidamente, lo que le obtendrá un mejor sueldo.
- Charley Stough, un feligrés de la Iglesia Christ Episcopal, usó su computadora portátil para establecer una oficina improvisada en una mesa de su bar favorito. Una mesera se sentó con sus formularios W-2 y no quiso hablar sobre los moretones que tenía en la cara. Pero cuando apareció la pantalla que decía que le iban a devolver miles de dólares se paró, muy emocionada, y gritó “¡QUÉ MARAVILLA, ahora puedo dejar a ese desgraciado!”

Los triunfos diarios como éstos ponen rostros reales en los datos emitidos por Dirección del Censo en noviembre, que demuestran que los créditos impositivos y los beneficios públicos son especialmente valiosos para las familias con niños. En 2010 el Crédito Impositivo de Ingresos de Trabajo (Earned Income Tax Credit, EITC) redujo la proporción de niños que vivían en la pobreza del 22.4% al 18.2%. Sin cupones de alimentos (ahora llamados SNAP), el 21.2% de los niños de EE UU hubieran caído por debajo del nivel de pobreza.

El invierno pasado Pan Para el Mundo (Bread for the World) calculó que los créditos impositivos federales pondrían ese año US\$10,000 millones en los presupuestos de las familias estadounidenses de bajos ingresos, el doble de lo que las obras de beneficencia de alimentos recaudarían en donaciones. Los créditos impositivos “reembolsables”, como el EITC, funcionan como una cuenta impositiva negativa, y pueden poner miles de nuevos dólares en el presupuesto de una familia.

El beneficio EITC máximo para una familia con tres o más niños ahora es de US\$5,751.

La reforma del bienestar público aprobada por el Congreso en 1996 incluyó cupones de alimentos, Medicaid y cupones de cuidado de niños como “apoyos de trabajo” para cerrar la brecha entre los sueldos bajos y el creciente costo de vida. Estos programas han demostrado cada vez más ser cruciales para mantener a flote a las familias trabajadoras. En promedio, los sueldos de los residentes de Ohio bajaron US\$7,000 desde 2000. En Ohio, 1.3 millones de residentes perdieron sus seguros de salud proporcionados por empleadores y los costos de los alimentos, los alquileres, los servicios públicos, la gasolina y la atención de la salud han subido vertiginosamente.

Reclutadas por la Fundación de Servicios Comunitarios Episcopales (Episcopal Community Services Foundation, ECSF), las iglesias episcopales de Cincinnati y Columbus fueron algunas de las primeras en usar el software gratuito en línea del Banco de Beneficios de Ohio diseñado para el Consejo Nacional de Iglesias para enseñar a voluntarios a llenar planillas impositivas y solicitudes de beneficios públicos. El Banco de Beneficios

de Ohio, establecido en 2006, ha conectado a familias con más de US\$555 millones para cumplir con sus necesidades esenciales.

La fecha del lanzamiento fue providencial. Cuando la recesión se hizo sentir, cierres de fábricas de Dayton a Martin’s Ferry causaron que el estado entrara en una verdadera crisis, cuando miles de personas perdieron empleos en fábricas con beneficios. Voluntarios episcopales han podido ayudar a familias a maximizar sus créditos impositivos y a inscribirse en cupones de alimentos y en Medicaid, liberando dólares escasos para usarlos para pagar el alquiler o la hipoteca.

El Banco de Beneficio ahora está en funcionamiento en diez estados, pero el 80% ha sido alcanzado en Ohio gracias a la estrategia de implementación sin paralelo diseñada por la Asociación de Ohio de Bancos de Alimentos Segunda Cosecha (Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks), que capacitó a más de 5,000 personas – la mayoría voluntarios – en iglesias y en organizaciones de base sin ánimo de lucro.

El Banco de Beneficios depende de consejeros capacitados, la mayoría de los cuales son voluntarios. La capacitación otorga a

los consejeros las destrezas y los conocimientos necesarios para ayudar a clientes con los impuestos, los beneficios y el formulario FAFSA, así como con las mejores prácticas para fijar expectativas con los clientes, mantener la privacidad, manejar preguntas sensibles y repasar procedimientos de seguimiento.

La capacitación de consejeros y el acceso a software en línea son gratuitos. Subsidios públicos y privados ayudan a mantener el software actualizado. Desde su lanzamiento en 2004, el Banco de Beneficios añadió varios beneficios nuevos. En 2010, por ejemplo, el ECSF reclutó iglesias para que ofrezcan cursillos para enseñar a estudiantes a usar el Banco de Beneficios para completar planillas impositivas y el temido formulario FAFSA (el portón de entrada a toda la asistencia financiera) en una misma sesión.

El Banco de Beneficios (The Benefit Bank) añadió solicitudes de reembolsos impositivos y beneficios que se pueden llenar en línea, facilitando que los voluntarios ayuden a la gente a llenar las preguntas, que están redactadas a un nivel de 4º grado. El Banco de Beneficios tiene un escritorio de ayuda en vivo.

Muchos estados pusieron formu-

larios de solicitud de beneficios públicos en línea que las personas pueden llenar por sí solas. Las iglesias con acceso a Internet pueden añadir fácilmente asistencia con los impuestos y los beneficios a sus despensas de alimentos o a sus clases de GED. Los voluntarios pueden usar sus propias computadoras portátiles. Si su estado no es parte del Banco del Beneficios, el programa VITA del IRS o la AARP pueden capacitar a sus feligreses para que ayuden a la gente a llenar sus planillas impositivas.

En Ohio, la creciente compresión de los miembros de la Iglesia Episcopal del impacto de los beneficios públicos causó que cambiáramos nuestra concentración de las comidas al Congreso. Las dos diócesis de Ohio aprobaron resoluciones en 2010 en las que solicitan al gobierno que preserve el financiamiento de la nutrición al abordar la reducción del déficit presupuestario.

El año pasado, programas de base para la prevención del hambre recogieron miles de historias que ilustran el alarmante número de residentes de Ohio que no pueden costear las necesidades básicas de sus familias. Esta avalancha de historias ayudó a prevenir que la legislatura del estado recortara fondos para

alimentos en un año en que la mayoría de los presupuestos de otros servicios humanos fueron recortados.

Ahora estamos tratando de prevenir que el Senado de EE UU apruebe un proyecto de ley aprobado por la cámara de diputados que recortaría el financiamiento federal de emergencia de alimentos en un 20%, en un momento en que las despensas de alimentos están luchando para afrontar un año más de aumentos de dos cifras en el número de personas que recurren a ellas para ayuda.

Los buenos cocineros de sus parroquias deben seguir preparando esas deliciosas cenas comunitarias de fin de mes. Pero si tiene feligreses a quienes les gusta conectarse con la gente y disfrutan trabajar en Internet, ¡movilícelos! Con 90 minutos de esfuerzo pueden hacer que una familia tenga estabilidad por un año entero.

*Ariel Miller es director ejecutivo de la Fundación de Servicios Comunitarios Episcopales del Sur de Ohio.*

### Resources

- AARP, Programa de Asistencia Impositiva (Tax-Aide Program): [\[income-tax-returns-oh.html\]\(http://www.thebenefitbank.com/income-tax-returns-oh.html\)](http://www.aarp.org/money/taxes/info-11-2011/tax-aide-</a></li>
</ul>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

- El Banco de Beneficios (The Benefit Bank): [www.thebenefitbank.com](http://www.thebenefitbank.com)
- Crédito Impositivo del IRS por Ingreso de Trabajo (IRS Earned Income Tax Credit): <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=96406,00.html>
- Programa VITA del IRS (IRS VITA Program): <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=184243,00.html>
- Fundación de Servicios Comunitarios Episcopales, Diócesis del Sur de Ohio (Episcopal Community Services Foundation, Diocese of Southern Ohio): <http://www.ecsfsouthernohio.org/>
- Banco de Beneficios de Ohio (The Ohio Benefit Bank): <http://www.thebenefitbank.com/tbboh>

Para obtener más información sobre la estrategia de extensión de beneficios o para ofrecerse como voluntario, póngase en contacto con MaryJo Woodburn, en la Asociación de Bancos de Alimentos Segunda Cosecha de Ohio (Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks): [Maryjo@oashf.org](mailto:Maryjo@oashf.org)

# Welcome Neighbor

BY DANIEL TRUDEAU

The Rev. John Sewak Ray remembers when he and the members of his parish first met Paw Htoo, a Burmese Karen refugee they welcomed to the United States a few years back.

The woman was getting off a plane in Atlanta with her three young girls, where she was to resettle with assistance from Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta (RRISA), a local affiliate of Episcopal Migration Ministries.

“They had travelled from Bangkok to Tokyo to Chicago to Atlanta, all in one go,” Ray said. “Imagine our shock when she got off the plane with only one plastic bag. We thought there must be luggage, but that was all they had.”

Ray and the members of Christ the King Episcopal Church in Lilburn, Georgia assisted the family for a period of several months after they arrived, providing a furnished apartment, food, English tutoring, transportation to appointments, friendship, and a sympathetic ear.

It was an undertaking laden with a number of challenges; Paw Htoo

spoke no English and had lost her husband while living in a refugee camp in Thailand. She was also arriving during a tough economic period and would have to quickly adjust and find work to support her three daughters. The members of Christ the King had to work hard to help her meet all of these challenges.

Still, Ray said that Christ the King, a new parish with limited financial resources and a diverse, multi-ethnic membership, benefitted greatly from the experience of welcoming Paw Thoo and her family.

“When it comes to our sense of God’s mission in the world, we can very often talk about these things in the abstract. ‘That’s a good Gospel lesson or that’s a good sermon,’ but how does it work out in practice?” Ray said. “Many churches go on mission trips, but we were not in a position to do that. Here was something that we were able to do that was a tremendously enriching and eye-opening experience.”

“Members were working with each other and getting to know each other. We grew in our sense of

unity, of oneness, and in our understanding of God’s mission in the world. I think that will always be a part of the DNA of our congregation: we’ll always be mission oriented, and it started with Paw Htoo and her girls.”

## Who are Refugees?

Refugees travel from their home countries to seek a better, safer life abroad. But refugees are distinct from other immigrants in a number of ways, most significantly in that they are fleeing their homes because they’ve experienced or have been threatened with persecution on account of race, religion, ethnicity, political views, or social identity.

Many refugees, like the family that Ray and his church assisted, spend years or decades in refugee camps, and the physical, mental, and emotional scars of violence, torture and harassment are a burden that some will carry their entire lives.

Only a small percentage of refugees find a permanent home through resettlement to a third country. In the U.S., that resettlement is managed by the Depart-

ment of State and the Department of Health and Human Services in partnership with service providers like Episcopal Migration Ministries and its local offices, which welcome up to 5,000 newcomers in a given year.

### **The Role of Churches**

Episcopal churches in the U.S. have been engaged in ministry with refugees since World War II, and many parishes have aided families in a similar fashion to Christ the King through a program called co-sponsorship.

Co-sponsorship is a partnership between a parish and one of Episcopal Migration Ministries' 33 local affiliate offices, which operate in 28 different dioceses of the Episcopal Church. Church groups receive information, training and ongoing support from resettlement professionals while committing to provide welcome and assistance to a family of refugees during their first critical months in the U.S.

Christ the King became involved after Tom Van Laningham, church outreach coordinator at RRISA, approached them. As a new parish and a relatively small one, the membership had doubts that they would be able to meet the financial needs of a refugee family.

But a \$3,000 grant from a larger, mission-focused church in downtown Atlanta provided the needed financial resources, while Ray and his congregation were able to provide the hands-on help the family needed.

"We realized that you can do this without money. You need to have a vision for what you can do. Money in the United States seems to be so important, but it's not the be all and end all," Ray said.

In the three years since the church and the family parted ways, Ray said Christ the King has reached out to refugees in other ways. A number of Karen families in the area came from the Anglican Church in Burma, and Christ the King has opened its doors to those individuals. Paw Htoo and her daughters moved to Athens, Georgia for employment, but Ray said he still hears from the family periodically.

The girls are doing very well in school and speak English fluently, providing Ray and the members of Christ the King with heartening evidence of the impact their ministry has had.

Meanwhile, other churches continue to welcome refugees

from many different parts of the world.

St. Alban's Church in Austin, Texas has already assisted two families – one from Iraq and another from Burundi -- and they'll be welcoming a family from Bhutan in December in partnership with Refugee Services of Texas, the local Episcopal Migration Ministries office.

Church member Jill Binder has been instrumental in guiding the co-sponsorship efforts. She said the presence of a new mission opportunity at St. Alban's has galvanized the parish's energy and commitment to mission.

"It's just something that has gotten a great response," Binder said. "This (Bhutanese) family is going to get on a plane and come here without knowing what they'll find. And it's such a good feeling to know that they'll find a furnished apartment and food and everything they need. It just makes you feel good."

*Daniel Trudeau is program manager for communications and media development at Episcopal Migration Ministries.*

## *Resources*

- Episcopal Migration Ministries:  
<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/emm/>
- EMM Video Resources - <http://vimeo.com/emmrefugee/videos>
- EMM Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/EpiscopalMigrationMinistries>
- EMM Online Newsletter: [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/109406\\_123964\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/109406_123964_ENG_HTML.htm)
- EMM Local Affiliate Offices:  
[http://www.episcopalchurch.org/emm/109406\\_53889\\_ENG\\_HTML.htm](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/emm/109406_53889_ENG_HTML.htm)
- Refugee Resettlement and Immigration Services of Atlanta: <http://www.rrisa.org/>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/>
- U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration: <http://www.state.gov/g/prm/>

# Strengthen Communities From Within

BY FAITH ROWOLD

When Emanuel was 15 years old, he started studying at the agricultural school run by El Hogar, a church-related organization based in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. El Hogar, which also runs a K-6 school and a vocational training school, is supported by the Episcopal Diocese of Honduras and its partner, Episcopal Relief & Development.

Honduras is a small country in Central America, with about 8 million people. Due to high levels of poverty and unemployment, people in rural areas largely survive on what they can grow, but traditional agricultural methods can be hard on the land, and may not provide sufficient food for a growing population.

Tackling these challenges is no easy task. But El Hogar and the Church in Honduras are doing just this – by providing a safe space where kids like Emanuel can learn, grow, and help create a better future for their communities.

Emanuel is one of 250 youths currently being housed, fed and educated by El Hogar. The agricultural school reaches out to rural families living in poverty by offering an

opportunity for boys and young men to gain an academic and practical background in basic agriculture, with the goal of helping them secure employment after graduation. At El Hogar, they learn animal husbandry and crop production, water conservation through the use of drip irrigation, and how to make nutrient-rich fertilizer with animal manure and composted plant matter.

In his first year, Emanuel studied a diverse range of topics, but the following year, he decided to specialize in animal care. “I love working with animals,” Emanuel said. “I would like to be a vet, so I can help animals with more skill.” He was able to take classes where he learned how to give injections, manage livestock reproduction and attend births, and treat common diseases. As he gains more experience caring for animals, he hopes to find a job and help support his family. “I would like to help my family, because they have been such a help to me,” Emanuel said.

El Hogar is just one example of the kind of program Episcopal Relief & Development supports, but it highlights what all of our programs

have in common: a commitment to empower and accompany our local partners as they rebuild after disasters and find lasting solutions to poverty, hunger and disease.

We collaborate with local Episcopal and Anglican dioceses, as well as ecumenically, to support development initiatives in over 40 countries worldwide. This work increases the capacity of our partners to start and manage programs that support infrastructure and increase the economic strength of their communities. Although our objectives are broken down into four core areas of activity – alleviating hunger, promoting health, creating economic opportunity and responding to disaster – the truth is we are really doing all of those things, all of the time. That is what integrated community development is all about. And even though disaster relief might be the most visible or newsworthy aspect of our work, empowering local institutions to strengthen their communities, build leadership and create infrastructure is actually the most effective way to reduce the impact of a disaster.

Also, because we partner with

local churches and faith-based organizations, Episcopal Relief & Development is able to reach communities that are – literally and figuratively – at the end of the road. In these remote or underserved places, the Church might be the only provider of essential social services. There may be limits to what it can provide, due to lack of resources or logistical challenges, but where the local church has been a consistent presence and earned the trust of the community, Episcopal Relief & Development can help with the rest. Working with local partners also increases community buy-in, and the likelihood that the results of these programs will be long-lasting.

For example, El Hogar’s ministry of community outreach provides a place for youths to receive education and training, and then helps them reach back out to their villages and improve the food supply for local families. In addition to their coursework, students and graduates of the agricultural school are also involved in community-based programs that allow them to share their acquired knowledge and skills with their families and neighbors. Five projects are currently underway in isolated, rural communities, in order to help people there to plant and cultivate a greater diversity of

crops, and market them effectively. Seed money is also being provided to help these communities start fruit plantations and pig farms – something Emanuel is particularly interested in. It is a privilege to be able to work with El Hogar and the local Church as they seek to create opportunities and a better future for young people in Honduras.

Throughout Episcopal Relief & Development’s work, our focus is on respecting the dignity of every person, and walking alongside people and communities as they use local resources and ingenuity to overcome challenges and live abundant lives. Although our mission and mandate come from Matthew 25: 37-40, our approach to community-based development can perhaps best be summed up with a quote from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu:

“Go with the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they have. Build on what they know. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, ‘We have done this ourselves’.”

***Faith Rowold*** is the communications officer at Episcopal Relief & Development.

### Resources

- El Hogar: <http://www.elhogar.org/>
- Episcopal Diocese of Honduras: <http://www.hondurasepiscopal.org/>
- Episcopal Relief & Development: <http://www.erd.org/>