

'Loaves and Fishes Ministry' feeds the needy in St. Louis

Three or four times a week, Alexian Brothers travel the streets of St. Louis in a Toyota minivan, distributing bread and other foods to food pantries, soup kitchens and individual homeless people as part of a ministry that recalls the work of the earliest Alexian Brothers.

Known among the Brothers as the "Loaves and Fishes Ministry," the year-old initiative has grown rapidly, serving more than 10 separate sites in St. Louis by this spring. "There are only 320,000 people, but the number of homeless people is incredible; there are just thousands and thousands," says Novice Brother Andrew Dinegar, C.F.A., who along with Novice Brother Paul Magnier, C.F.A., has helped develop the ministry. "There's such a great need out there." The ministry fits the Brothers' mission and reflects their values "to a 'T,'" Brother Andrew says. "Going back 800 years to how the Alexian Brothers started by serving the poor...it's coming full circle."

Brother Thomas Klein, C.F.A., started the ministry in May 2011 after his barber asked him if he knew of anyone who could use some extra bread. The barber and members of his family regularly pick up bread and other items from a food bank and deliver them to the family's church for distribution to the needy. With the food bank providing 3,000 loaves a week for free to the church, it often has more than it needs.

Brother Thomas determined that a church food pantry where he volunteered could use the surplus bread, and he began delivering it there. When Brother Thomas was reassigned temporarily last summer to Signal Mountain, Tenn., Brother Andrew began handling the bread deliveries. He started networking and discovered several other organizations that needed

bread. Brother Paul joined the effort last September, and he and Brother Andrew soon were spending 15 to 20 hours a week picking up bread and other items and making deliveries.

During some trips, Brother Andrew and Brother Thomas have stuffed the minivan full with more than 2,500 pounds of bread, rolls, cakes and pastries. While making their deliveries, the Brothers have discovered another need: Redistributing surplus food, beverages and clothing donated to food pantries and soup kitchens. "We offer to distribute these items to other organizations that need them," Brother Andrew says.

The deliveries that touch the Brothers' hearts the most are those they make directly to individual homeless people on the streets. The Brothers, who usually wear their cleric's collar during deliveries, always invite individual recipients to select what they want from the minivan, rather than giving them specific items. Invariably, the recipients are very polite, thanking the Brothers and taking very little, despite the Brothers' encouragement to take more. "They say, 'No, no, there's always someone out there who needs it more than me,'" Brother Andrew says. "They're watching out for others. It's just incredible."

Brother Andrew and Brother Paul say they are grateful to their fellow Alexian Brothers for their guidance, support and prayers, which have made the ministry possible. "We are all in this together, equally," Brother Andrew says.



Novice Brother Andrew Dinegar, C.F.A., (third from right), and Novice Brother Paul Magnier, C.F.A., (second from right), visit with staff members at a St. Louis soup kitchen after dropping off bread at the facility.



Novice Brother Andrew Dinegar, C.F.A., (left), and Novice Brother Paul Magnier, C.F.A., unload bread and other bakery foods during a delivery.

Reaching out to the homeless

On nights when the temperature dropped below 20 in St. Louis last winter, Novice Brother Paul Magnier, C.F.A., headed outdoors. His mission: Encourage homeless people to spend the night in emergency shelters that open in such weather.

Brother Paul volunteered for the assignment as part of the Winter Outreach Group, a lay organization established by members of the public concerned about the plight of the homeless.

"We go out, locate homeless people and try to convince them to come into the shelters if beds are still available," says Brother Paul, who joined the Alexian Brothers as a postulant in June 2011. "If we can't get them to come in, or there are no more beds left, we give them blankets, socks, hats and food."