

A vivid childhood memory of mine is a smiling man coming to the house I shared with my parents and seven siblings, and delivering boxes of food. Why do I remember this? It did not happen frequently, maybe only a few times. It was not particularly dramatic. Maybe it stuck in my mind because I did not understand why we were receiving the food. My father always had a fulltime job. My mother was one of the hardest workers I have ever known, caring for, feeding, and clothing eight children without much money. Maybe I remember it because, despite not having a lot of money, we never felt deprived of food and always could count on three solid meals every day. So why did someone have to bring us food? Maybe I remember it because of the joy I felt at the boxes of food that came out of nowhere that we would enjoy for the next several days.

What does this childhood memory have to do with God, with Jesus, with my Christian faith? Growing up Catholic for me meant much more than going to church on Sunday since I went to Catholic schools from second grade through college. Catholic culture was ingrained in my blood. Big parts of what became ingrained were the powerful words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger.

However, the most lasting effect on me of the work of Jesus was what I learned when I was studying for a Master's degree in labor relations at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. I researched Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement for a labor history paper. The soup kitchen and house of hospitality she started in New York City during the depression, which led to a movement of other soup kitchens and houses of hospitality throughout the country, was the most dramatic living out of feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless in the name of Jesus that I had encountered. This charitable work, along with the promotion of social justice by the Catholic Worker, had enough of an effect on me that I suspended my career in labor relations for a short time to take a position with the forerunner of today's AmeriCorps to work in an inner-city neighborhood in my hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts.

The inspiration of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement continued into my adult life after I began my career in labor relations in Vermont. When I started attending the Old Meeting House nearly 30 years ago, I soon realized that the works of charity and justice with respect to the poor were much in evidence at the Old Meeting House. The long-time volunteer work of Diana and Malcolm Fielder at the Onion River Food Shelf, and the significant annual monetary and food contributions of the Old Meeting House, particularly stood out

to me. They were instrumental in my volunteering to serve on the Missions Committee many years ago. When OMH Member Victoria King, then Director of the Montpelier Food Pantry, addressed our Missions Committee approximately 15 years ago, I was moved to become involved in the Montpelier Food Pantry.

I have remained actively involved in the Montpelier Food Pantry and the OMH Missions Committee – recently renamed Justice in Action Ministry – ever since. In today’s Witness, I want to share with you some of what I have observed and experienced over the years. I hope it gives you a sense of the extent and effect of OMH’s outreach to our more vulnerable and marginalized neighbors.

In devoting 10 percent of its annual revenues to Justice in Action allocations, the Old Meeting House makes substantial financial contributions to Onion River Food Shelf and Just Basics (the umbrella organization overseeing the Montpelier Food Pantry), as well as other organizations serving the poor such as Good Samaritan Haven, Capstone Community Action, and Peoples Health and Wellness Clinic. These annual allocations in our budget are only one way I see the spirit of God moving in the justice in action work of OMH. In-kind contributions and personal involvement by OMH members are two other methods demonstrating charity and justice with respect to the poor.

Onion River Food Shelf is perhaps the best example of a mix of significant financial contributions from Justice in Action allocations and substantial personal involvement by OMH members. OMH has provided the bulk of financial support for the operations of the Food Shelf since its founding. As the needs at the all-volunteer Food Shelf have substantially grown over the years, the yeoman efforts of the Fielders have been supplemented by several other OMH members. The Montpelier Food Pantry on the other hand has been far from an all-OMH affair, but nonetheless have had several OMH members make substantial personal contributions over the years.

I have found it particularly helpful during the past few years since COVID and the floods descended on us to compare notes with Diana Fielder on whether the Onion River Food Shelf and the Montpelier Food Pantry are experiencing similar trends. That appears to be the case as both are seeing much heavier need accompanied by greater financial contributions, expanded operations and difficulties obtaining sufficient food to meet the need.

An illustration of the increased need is the home delivery program of the Montpelier Food Pantry. Prior to the last few years, the Food Pantry did not make any home deliveries. The food pantry patrons had to come to the pantry during its

hours of operation to receive food. A few years ago, the Pantry initiated a food delivery program to weekly provide a box of food to patrons who had difficulty coming to the pantry to receive food. When the program started, we made about 10 weekly deliveries. A year ago, it was up to approximately 25 deliveries. This week, it is up to 40 deliveries. Who are the recipients of these weekly deliveries? – the elderly, the disabled, the chronically ill, and those with transportation issues. For example, among the persons I delivered to this week were:

- a family of six living in a housing complex a few miles from downtown Montpelier who do not have transportation to get to the food pantry
- a 65-year-old woman with a degenerative spinal injury who is physically unable to come to the pantry
- an older man living alone with a severe CPOD disability.

Two other justice in action programs providing food, in these cases to those experiencing homelessness, involve substantial in-kind contributions by OMH members. For many years, OMH members have prepared twice monthly meals, under the coordination of Fran Mallery, for the Good Samaritan Haven. OMH members also have provided meals and/or snacks for the last six years each Tuesday evening to the unhoused in Montpelier. The in-kind contributions by

OMH members in these two programs total approximately \$5,000 on an annual basis.

In coordinating the Tuesday evening provision of meals and/or snacks during the past six years, I have observed the complexities of those experiencing homelessness. Many of the homeless have substance abuse problems, whether alcohol or drugs. This is debilitating for many, sometimes leading to terribly sad stories. An engaging and humorous person was found unconscious outside on a frigid night in Montpelier due to an overdose. Two of the unhoused who appeared to have promising futures could not successfully complete rehabilitation programs.

Some of the homeless are mentally ill or have mental disability issues. Others do not struggle with substance abuse, mental illness or mental disability issues but lack of employment leaves them unable to afford housing. Some of the unhoused are employed but cannot find an apartment they can afford. Medical care for the homeless is deficient. Lacking insurance, they generally only receive emergency aid. One of the unhoused staying in a shelter damaged his spleen and broke ribs in a fall. He was able to get emergency care but then was unable to recover properly. He needed bed rest after discharge from the hospital but could

not get it because he had to leave the shelter for 12 hours a day and be on his feet. Some of the homeless do not even have the comfort of the shelter during the winter. Due to difficulty in getting along with others, disruptive behavior or other actions causing eviction from the shelter, some need to find other places to spend the night.

I emphasize that not everything I have witnessed is grim. The homeless often rely on each other for mutual support, and I have observed many acts of kindness and protection of the most vulnerable. One particularly memorable instance was a homeless person creatively and compassionately making the effort with a mentally ill person to distract her from her irrational thoughts and actions. I observed and heard reports of couples providing support to each other during difficult times. Also, it is not unusual for the unhoused to express gratitude for a hot meal or snacks. More generally, it is apparent that many are grateful that someone cares for them.

Another justice in action program involving substantial in-kind contributions by the OMH community is the PINS partnership between OMH and the Vermont Department for Children and Families. Christmas and Easter gift cards, and school backpacks and supplies, are provided to foster children under the Barre

Department for Children and Families office. Approximately \$3,000 of in-kind contributions are made on an annual basis. In coordinating the PINS program for many years, I have been continually impressed by the generosity of spirit demonstrated by the OMH Community in responding to meet the needs of vulnerable children. It also has been heartening for me to see how DCF staff have been visibly pleased when I appear with the PINS contributions.

The OMH is not a large faith community, but in my lifetime of belonging to various Christian congregations OMH is the one to me that has strived most faithfully and compassionately in performing the essential works of charity and justice to the poor and marginalized as emphasized by Jesus.