



(submitted by Martha Hanley)

Metro Catholic Outreach, a cooperative effort by the 11 Cedar Rapids-area Catholic parishes to provide social justice and outreach services in the metropolitan area, has developed from concept to near-grand opening in little more than a year. What's lending energy to this "grass-roots" project, according to Sister Joellen Price, pastoral associate at St. Pius X Parish in Cedar Rapids, is the presence of the Holy Spirit, who "is guiding it and moving it along."

Shortly after the first of the year, Metro Catholic Outreach plans to open its doors at 420 Sixth St. SE in Cedar Rapids, in the Sister Mary Lawrence Community Center. Mercy Medical Center in Cedar Rapids bought this downtown space in 2010 to honor a well-known Sister of Mercy and offered it to community social-service organizations. The medical center is charging \$1 a year plus the cost of renovation and utilities. Metro Catholic Outreach will be the building's sixth tenant, in offices directly under Catholic Charities'.

Three services will be offered: a call center, where volunteers will screen incoming calls and determine needs; a food pantry; and emergency financial assistance, which will most likely be targeted to help with housing, medical co-payments, and utilities expenses.

The movement to collaborate in social-concerns ministry has its roots in a February 2010 document, "Sharing in the Mission of Jesus," which reported on the findings of the Cedar Rapids Deanery Pastoral Planning Task Force. The document, written by priests, religious and lay representatives, recommended that one person coordinate all social-justice outreach in the community.

In September 2010, Sister Linda Bechen became pastoral associate at St. Jude's Parish after serving at St. Patrick's Parish in Cedar Rapids. She saw that all of the parishes received calls from the public for assistance in a variety of ways. She called a meeting of representatives of the west-side parishes—St. Jude's, St. Ludmila's, St. Patrick's and John XXIII—to discuss how to collaborate on financial assistance and how to serve people better.

Once Sister Joellen, of the east-side St. Pius X Parish, inquired about joining the discussion, the decision was made to invite all 11 metro-area parishes. The first meeting was held in December 2010.

St. Pius X already had a thriving food pantry. Five years ago, the parish distributed five food baskets a week. In the aftermath of the 2008 flood, that number jumped to 40 baskets a day and now has settled down to 35 to 40 baskets a week. With the recession, families never seen before are seeking food; Sister Joellen said that by the end of last month, the number of families served exceeded that typically seen in a year.

Parishes were invited to support the effort as they were able to. Pastors of area parishes have signed a commitment policy to help in one of four ways:

- With renovation expenses over three years
- With a monthly donation
- With a pledge to collect food regularly and take it to the center
- With volunteers

“The parishes have done lots of good work,” Sister Linda said. “The bottom line is, we’re all doing a good work. How can we do it better?”

Barb Kane of St. Pius X Parish and Jim Sullivan of St. Matthew Parish have served as interim co-directors since the beginning of October. Their job, Barb said, has been to “facilitate—to inform parishes, set up phones, move refrigerators” and so on.

Barb said that what she especially values is that the center’s operations are based on the seven themes of Catholic social teaching (see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Web site). This effort, she said, “is coming from the Catholic community into the greater community.”

“People are excited to get this up and running,” Sister Linda said. “People were really wanting a Catholic presence [in the local social-services arena]. Even the name very clearly tells people that this [center] has been hosted and sponsored by the Catholic parishes.”

“The biggest challenge now,” Jim said, “is actually getting the doors open. We have a great idea. We want to be an ongoing organization that serves the needs of the people.”