

St. Vincent de Paul Society responds with compassion

Donations, volunteers are always welcome to help those in need

By BOB DE WITT

Correspondent

David Vtipil remembers the desperation of a single mother who needed help. Her husband had left her and their two children. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul responded with compassion, paying some of her bills.

She found a job, overcame health issues and put herself through nursing school. Today, she donates to the organization to help repay their kindness.

Vtipil joined the society's St. Teresa of Avila conference in Perrysville 25 years ago, one of about 100 conferences that serve the poor across the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Vincentians help faith communities to be vital centers of service, deepening people's relationship with Jesus, one goal of the On Mission for The Church Alive! initiative.

"We make home visits and find out more about what someone needs," Vtipil said. "Sometimes we pray with them. One crisis can put them over the edge."

One woman in Pittsburgh's West End had survived without electricity for three years with little income after her parents died. The St. Philip conference got her power turned back on, according to member Dian Perkins. A man suffering from stage-4 cancer was facing foreclosure. They helped with payments and took him to medical treatments.

Last year the Catholic lay association assisted 104,924 individuals in southwestern Pennsylvania, said Ricardo Luckow, executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's Diocesan Council of Pittsburgh. Supported by parishioners and other generous donors, they help with rent, utility bills, clothing, furniture and other items.

More than 38,000 people received food assistance in 2017. Thrift stores sell donated goods at a low price, helping to raise money.

Despite a lower unemployment rate, the ranks of the working poor are growing. More than 40 percent of Pennsylvania households can't afford basic necessities,

A few years ago, a woman asked for assistance paying her rent. An immigrant who spoke little English, she cared for an adult son who suffered from severe schizophrenia. He often beat her when he had an episode. She was frightened and alone. A Vincentian befriended her, took care of some bills and then helped both of them become U.S. citizens. Today the son is getting medical attention, and her life has improved considerably.

Carol Kremer of the St. Athanasius conference in West View sees mostly younger families.

"The need has increased significantly in recent years," she said. "People have health problems, can't work and then have trouble paying their bills."

"I am happiest when I am serving," said Anthony Scarnati, who leads the St. Vitus conference in New Castle. "The people who are truly in need, you have to convince them to let you help."

"We're out there strengthening our own faith by serving others," said John Nard Jr., president of the St. James conference in Sewickley. "We invite them to come to our parish, and let them know there's somebody out there who cares about them."

Father Bud Murhammer, pastor of St. Margaret of Scotland Parish in Green Tree, noted how Vincentians practice the corporal works of mercy, helping to sanctify members.

"It's not just about handing out money," he said. "They offer encouragement, treating the entire person and helping some to renew their faith."

"Our baptismal call is to love others as Jesus loves us," said Erin Carmody, president of the St. Bernard conference in Mount Lebanon. "And we are always looking for new Vincentians."

Ten years ago there were about 1,700 active members in southwestern Pennsylvania, according to Luckow. Today there are about 1,200. The society especially would like younger people to consider its ministry.

"It's a special calling," Vtipil said.

To learn more about the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, including store locations and where to donate clothing

according to a recent United Way study. Between 2005 and 2016, the annual cost of utilities for an average home jumped 43 percent, as medical costs also continue to rise. Meanwhile, median income in the U.S. increased less than 3 percent over a decade.

Founded in 1833 and named for a French priest who dedicated himself to serving the poor, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul today has about 800,000 members worldwide. The first U.S. conference was established in St. Louis in 1845 and in Pittsburgh in 1852. They continue to help neighbors in need.

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