

A Ministry of Prayer and Presence

By John La Boone

"Dear brothers and sisters, pray for us." – 1 Thessalonians 5:25

I love ecumenical initiatives of all kinds. The world needs more people from different traditions, faiths and backgrounds to come together and respond to the needs of their fellow human beings with an effort that is strengthened because it is diversely shared. I recently learned about an inspiring ministry started in September 2016 by an Episcopalian and a Roman Catholic in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to serve people in troubled neighborhoods regardless of their religion or lack of religion.

It's called "Collars on the Corner," and it was created by Episcopal Deacon Kevin Stewart and Roman Catholic Deacon Jim Banach. The two men teamed up last year after discussing over lunch how they wanted to get outside and engage struggling people in their city in new ways. They had a great role model for doing that. "My understanding of scripture is Jesus spent more time out on the streets than in a building, so we felt that we should go," explained Stewart, who is the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee's missionary for community engagement. "But go where and do what?"



The ministry is partly a response to growing violence in the city which makes people feel scared and sometimes helpless. There was also a fatal shooting by a policeman last year that especially stirred up more violence and tension in parts of Milwaukee. Stewart and Banach decided on launching a street ministry in a mostly minority inhabited neighborhood where hope and comfort are not always easy to come by. Banach is a deacon at St. Catherine's Catholic Church which is located in a poor neighborhood and known for its social justice activities. He had a specific

street corner in mind to get things going. "I thought to myself: it's busy; there's a need," he recalled.



Together, the two deacons started appearing each Saturday at the intersection of West Center and North 51st Streets, wearing their clerical collars to publically signal their vocations. They set up a card table with a sign that said "Prayer Requests" and a box where people

can write down their concerns and submit them for specific prayers. They found that there was an enormous hunger among the locals for prayer and kind words. "They were hungry to pray from day one," recalled Stewart.

An example is area resident Luria Sampson, who was driving to visit his daughter one Saturday. He spends a lot of time worrying about his family and all the violence in their part of town. When he saw the clergymen on the corner with their table and sign, he stopped, parked his car and investigated. He was warmly greeted by Stewart and Banach who invited him to let them pray with him. "Yes, please do," Sampson replied. "I could use a good prayer."

The two deacons launched the ministry but they have enthusiastically invited other clergy of all denominations to join in and to set up more prayer stations on other corners. Quite a few pastors, like the Rev. Anthony Luckett of the non-denominational St. Paul's Church, have joined the ministry. In the winter, they had to move indoors. After all, it is Wisconsin and the weather gets fierce in the wintertime. But the drive to meet God's people wherever they are is strong and growing. To try to reach more people, Stewart started placing prayer request boxes across the city in places where people might need but not expect to encounter God's love for humanity, humble places like laundromats. He regularly collects the requests and they are prayed for by a larger prayer team that supports the ministry.

The goal of Collars on the Corner is not to fill pews or bring people into regular church-going, although that's great if it should happen. The goal

is to comfort and care for people and to let them know that they are not forgotten or discarded. Stewart tells about a person he prayed with who actually feared returning to church because that person felt that they had been away for too long and, in their own opinion, done too much wrong. "Maybe that person will walk through a church door again, we don't know," Stewart said. "But on that day, the church was out here meeting people where they're at."

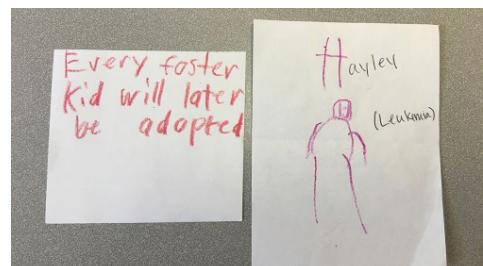
A great thing about good works is that they set an example and open people's minds to new possibilities. The Rev. Mindy Davis, a priest of St.



James Episcopal Church in West Bend, Wisconsin, heard Stewart describe the Collars on the Corner ministry and felt inspired. She got some other members of her church, a couple of prayer boxes, hundreds of pens imprinted with the words "God Loves You" and headed to the nearby fairgrounds. They set up a prayer booth and operated it during the fair, wearing T-shirts that were printed with "Can I pray for you?" They put a sign on their booth that said "Prayer Booth - All Prayers, No Preaching."

"Jesus didn't command us to fill the pews. Instead, he said 'Feed my sheep,'" she explained. "Episcopalians like the fact that we are freethinkers and we don't like to have Jesus shoved down our throats. People [in our community] believe in God and the power of prayer, but many don't have a church community to pray with and for them. The booth was a non-threatening way to serve them and others."

In the six days of the fair, the prayer team collected hundreds of written prayers and also prayed on the spot with anyone who wanted that. They had a special box for children to submit their prayer requests, some of which had hand drawn pictures of their concerns. One little boy kept returning as he thought of more people who needed help. One of his requests was: "All foster children will later be adopted." And then there was the little



girl with curly blonde hair named Hayley who had leukemia. She drew a picture of herself to put into the box so she could be prayed for.

Davis brought prayer books for the team to use, but it turns out they weren't needed. The Holy Spirit supplied all the right words.

The Church can use everyone's gifts. Many people don't think they have any gifts to share, but every person has something that is needed by others. We can take whatever we have and try to develop it. God will help us with that. Some people have a gift for street ministry. Others may have the ability to support those who take it directly to the streets. Still others have different gifts that are no less valuable. The challenge of the Church is to encourage everyone to share what they have, so that God's love can be distributed generously and universally in this broken and often discouraged world.

Those who bless become blessed themselves. It really works that way. One big misfortune that can happen to a church is for its people to become satisfied with a comfortable routine of church life, simply enjoying the company of people like themselves and never encountering those who urgently need to feel the presence of a God who cares about them.



There is a strong human temptation to put up barriers, however subtly, to keep *us* separated from *them*. Their need may cut into our surplus. That is what the world teaches us to do every day – and that is why the example and the teachings of Jesus continue to be revolutionary. Sharing prayers, cheerfulness, acceptance, politeness and respect with those who usually don't get those things is a valuable ministry and much needed. Also – and perhaps most importantly – as we see with Collars on the Corner, one good thing leads to another. When we start praying for and with each other, kind actions are not far behind. When people start expressing that they care, wonderfully surprising things can develop. There's no telling where it will end, if it ends at all.

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the fearful, the friendless and the distressed, those who are trapped in dangerous circumstances and feel alone in their plight. We pray for all people who have little or no share in our society's abundance, the isolated and all who have none to care for them. Help us to embrace those who are broken in spirit and overwhelmed by lonely struggle; strengthen us and remove our fear so that we may reach out to them and become their brothers and sisters, eager to console and encourage and to offer them dignity, understanding and peace. Grant this, merciful Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became broken and lonely, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.