

CHURCHES WORKING TOGETHER IN COMMUNITY

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In some parts of the 80,000-strong Diocese of Virginia, The Episcopal Church is like a Starbucks coffee shop, with a church, it seems, on every corner. Those communities are being touched by God in many ways.

Individually, our churches reach out to the community and the world. But with such close proximity, we also should find ways to engage jointly in meeting needs. Some of our churches in Northern Virginia have embraced that opportunity and come together to do something special for the homeless in their communities.

It all began when a parishioner at St. Paul's, Bailey's Crossroads, decided she wanted to do something different and even fun for those struggling with the serious problem of homelessness. The parish agreed and soon the Rev. Liz Tomlinson had reached out to the local homeless shelter, which is just across the street from St. Paul's. The shelter leaders informed her that, though volunteers have helped, no one had ever planned an event outside of the shelter for their residents. Soon, plans for a picnic in the parking lot at St. Paul's were set in motion.

Tomlinson partnered with the Rev. Bernie Schroeder, interim rector at St. Patrick's, Falls Church, and the two congregations began planning. Parishioners from St. Alban's and St. John's, Arlington, expressed an interest in

participating as well, and arrived on the day of the picnic to set up and serve. With the help of parishioners from the four churches and local retailers, the picnic was a success.

The event not only fed the people living at the local shelter, it also allowed them time to enjoy fellowship with our churches and with one another. It was a social occasion and a time for conversation. Being fed physically and emotionally reminded them that, despite their current situation, they are as worthy and valuable as any human being. Overheard among a number of the conversations were invitations from parishioners to picnic guests to join in Sunday worship. When we treat people in need with the dignity they deserve, we are living into our Baptismal Covenant.

This is the kind of work we do as individual parishes that often can have greater impact when parishes work together.

"There is a synergy that happens when congregations get together," says Tomlinson. "Each has its own personality, but the interactions allow for more creativity, more energy and novel ideas, as well as mutual support."

It was an uplifting time, not just for shelter residents, but for all involved. All agreed that this should be an annual event. Together, they already are planning for a bigger and better event. +



Members and clergy of St. Paul's, Bailey's Crossroads; St. Patrick's, Fall Church; and St. John's, Arlington, prepare to serve meals for community homeless.

