

Dear Partners and Friends-

For this month's Prayer Letter I thought I'd share a feature the Omaha World Herald recently ran on inCOMMON. Please enjoy... and THANK YOU for the many ways you help us 'show and share' the Gospel among our friends and neighbors living in this vulnerable part of the city.

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Where poverty fight is personal

By Carol Bicak
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

« Community

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InCommon is the name and the philosophy of a small group of people dedicated to fighting poverty in the Omaha area, one neighborhood at a time.

The name harks back to the core belief of the organization: that the haves and the have-nots of our community have a lot in common.

"We have more similarities than differences," said Christian Gray, the executive director. "There is so much we could share that we don't."

The group used to be Mosaic Community Development but in July 2009 changed its name to inCommon. It is involved in many neighborhood activities, including feeding, clothing and assisting the poor.

It is also starting a project to record stories about neighborhoods and get input from residents on problems that need to be fixed and ideas on how to fix them.

For the past couple of years, the group has concentrated on the depressed Park Avenue neighborhood, and it continues to do so.

At the inCommon office, at 1258 S. 13th St., local artists display their works, and occasional auctions are held to sell them. The office also serves as dining hall and concert venue for local bands as well as office space for the five inCommon staff members and the group's many volunteers.

The organization "has changed a lot through the years," Gray said. "But we continue to try to serve those in poverty."

The projects have been diverse, from helping refurbish homes to providing after-school activities for children. Classes in personal development, job readiness, food preparation, nutrition and gardening have been offered.

InCommon is trying to meet the social service needs of the area, Gray said, adding that one partnership in the works is with the University of Nebraska at Omaha's School of Social Work.

The object is to make the people in the neighborhood self-sufficient. "We want a co-op rather than a pantry," he said. "These aren't handouts. We want to develop the community to take care of their own needs."

He continued: "We've always had a main thread: to build relationships. We do everything through that component."

That's why staff and volunteers sit down to eat and talk with the people they serve at free meals on Saturdays at the First Baptist Church and the smaller Common Table held Monday evenings at the inCommon office.

"The meals blur the line between donors and recipients," Gray said.

A group from Assumption Christian Church in Assumption, Ill., serves lunch at First Baptist Church last month. The group, including, from left, Amanda Choatie, Justin Howse and Seth Bates, was on a mission trip to Omaha.

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WANT TO VOLUNTEER?

InCommon always can use volunteers, not only for the Saturday free meals but also for smaller Monday night meals and all the organization's ongoing projects.

Call Caitie Caughey at 933-6672 to volunteer.

Visit incommoncd.org to learn about inCommon's various programs and ministries, to see video from the Listening Project and to learn about coming events. Donations to the Social Capital Campaign can be made here.



The Saturday meals are the product of inCommon and its partner Neighbors United, an interfaith group of volunteer churches throughout the city. Neighbors United has existed for a couple of years, but on May 27, participating ministers and inCommon members were on hand for its official 501(c)3, or nonprofit status, signing event at First Presbyterian Church.

The member churches take turns providing the Saturday meals at First Baptist in the Park Avenue neighborhood. These free meals usually draw between 200 and 250 people each week, Gray said.

People who come for the food also can pick up needed items of clothing at a "closet" in another part of the church.

InCommon's Brittany Hanson is a happy and dynamic presence at the Saturday meals. On a recent Saturday, she greeted diners, exchanged jokes with friends and made newcomers feel welcome. She also helped serve food, chatted up seated diners and tried to find volunteers for the Listening Project, a new endeavor.

The project lets people from the neighborhood talk to trained listeners from inCommon, she said. The listeners' job is to draw out the people who agree to talk, getting them to remember the area's good times and describe the bad. They are encouraged to offer their opinions on what would improve their neighborhood.

"Listening is so crucial," said Caldwell Manners, one of the volunteers working on the Listening Project. "You can't move forward without it."

Although not a lot of people came to the "listening booths" on the first day of the project, Manners was sure more would take part in the weeks ahead.

Reuben Thornton Sr. came to the church for the free meal after a friend told him about it. He stayed to be one of the first to talk in a "listening booth."

He said he came to Omaha from Louisiana about 10 years ago. He thinks one of the main problems in the Park Avenue area is slum landlords.

"It's going to take a long time to put things right," he said, adding that he was happy to have someone actually listen to what he had to say.

InCommon works in partnership with many other local agencies and groups, such as Metro Area Continuing Care for the Homeless, Midlands Mentoring Partnership, Christian Community Development Association, City Impact, African-American Empowerment Network, Just Rest artist community, Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Lutheran Family Services, Heart Ministry Center, Siena-Francis House and the Urban League of Nebraska.

One program Gray hopes to launch is Room in the Inn, another collaboration with area churches. The national program is a way for people of faith to become directly involved with people who are homeless. By helping the homeless in person, it's hoped church members will develop a deeper understanding of the complex issue.

Gray said another goal for inCommon and the Park Avenue area is building a community center. InCommon has launched the "Social Capital Campaign" to raise \$23,000 by September in order to get a matching grant from the Peter Kiewit Foundation. He's confident it will come to pass.

"We're all in this together," Gray said.

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