

“Room in our inn.”

Our Lady of Fatima parishioners grow d ministry and bring the Christmas story to life 24 nights a year.

BY KAT SPELLMAN-MINER WITH CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES

When the knock came back in 2006, a group of volunteers at Our Lady of Fatima answered with open arms and hearts. Today their ranks have grown to more than 110 families whose mission it is to welcome men who have no place to sleep. In its fifth winter of offering a safe place for the weary to lay their heads, the church volunteers, who call themselves “hosts,” seamlessly transform a buzzing, multi-use room in their church basement into a dry, welcoming shelter for homeless overnight guests to wash up, socialize and sleep.

Eight church shelters

This “winter overflow shelter” is an effort led by parish volunteers like Sue Patneaude, who was part of the early team of volunteers who answered the call. Patneaude and other hosts see that two nights a week, from October through March, the room at Our Lady of Fatima Church in Seattle’s Magnolia neighborhood is readied and warm and that the pizza is on the way. On a recent Monday, another volunteer, Lou Spear, climbed behind the wheel of the parish van. Spear, a Fatima parishioner since 1975, was headed downtown to pick up 10 men from the St. Martin de Porres shelter where that night, like every night, the need exceeded the number of beds available. St. Martin de Porres, one of the 140 programs Catholic Community Services offers in Western Washington, provides beds to 212 homeless men, ages 50 and up, every night of the year. But the need is always greater. St. Martin de Porres turns to parishes in the Archdiocese of Seattle for help to shelter additional men on many winter nights.

St. James Cathedral was the first to organize an overflow shelter nearly 20 years ago, with Fatima being the eighth church community to introduce a program to serve some of King County’s poorest and most vulnerable men.

“Gratifying experience”

Fatima Pastor Father Jim Johnson said, “Our team worked from the models established at St. James and St. Joseph to start our program. It has been a wonderful partnership working with Catholic Community Services and the good work they do with St. Martin de Porres.”

Patneaude has worked side by side with hosts like Randy Back, Margaret Chandler, Tim Cooke, Gary Gill and many others to see that the next morning’s breakfast is set out and the

men are given a ride back downtown with sack lunch in hand and a kind word from their driver.

“I love my shelter work. It’s tangible. It’s inspirational,” said Patneau. “What we all do, we do in the most humble way and we want to be humble before these men — that is the most important ingredient. It is a most gratifying experience.”

“A real blessing”

Fatima volunteers have a contagious enthusiasm which attracts more people to the fold, ensuring an ever-growing pool of volunteers from their church family who cook for, care for and connect with their guests.

The passion to reach out and help these men, many of whom are veterans, has not waned since parish volunteers first organized the ministry. They’re driven by the goal of getting vulnerable men out of the cold and off the street for the night. They never have had a no-show volunteer or too few helping hands.

“At Our Lady of Fatima, their hearts are there for these folks they basically don’t even know,” said St. Martin de Porres program director Bob Goetschius. “These men get little interaction, and the camaraderie and human interaction is an important part of the ministry. The fact that someone from the community has reached out to them is a really important thing. This is a real blessing for the men.”

“The people of Fatima have been outstanding in their leadership and commitment to welcome the weary,” said Tina O’Brien, CCS’ senior vice president of mission resources. “It’s a powerful way to see the Christ child’s story played out in a very real way.”

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