

Jonathan M. Callard

Neighborhood Action renews its call as needs of poor increase

by JONATHAN M. CALLARD

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If you happen to be standing on the Boston Common just before 7 A.M. on any given day, you might see Ron Tibbets walking to church. Plant yourself anywhere between the Park Street “T” stop and the State House and you might hear him call out the name of somebody lying on a bench before stopping to talk for a few moments. Then he continues on, making his way up to Beacon Street, then around the corner and down the hill onto Bowdoin Street.

If they are awake, folks under blankets at the top of the steps of the Church of St. John the Evangelist might raise their arms in greeting as Ron walks by. After a few more hellos, he steps inside, straightens his clerical collar, grabs his coffee and goes to work. Another day begins at Neighborhood Action, Inc.

The Rev. Ronald Tibbets, a vocational deacon in the diocese, is the executive director of Neighborhood Action Inc., which operates as the social ministry arm of St. John’s.

The program was incorporated in 1986 to gain eligibility for funding usually denied to religious organizations. It provides food, comfort and fellowship for the poor, homeless and elderly living around Boston Common and Beacon Hill.

With recent budget cuts on the federal, state and local levels, the needs of the indigent have dramatically increased. Neighborhood Action is rising to the challenge.

“For me, it’s living into the long tradition of this place which began with the Cowley Fathers years and years and years ago,” explained Deacon Tibbets. “I’m sort of finding myself living into a tradition of servant ministry, which really exemplifies, I think, the diaconate and the call to being a deacon.”

Mopping floors of the parish hall at St. John’s, helping in the kitchen and then putting on the clerical collar to say the blessing at the Thursday evening meal, Deacon Tibbets is, in the words of the prayer book, interpreting “to the church the needs, concerns and hopes of the world.” And he is joined by a dedicated cadre of staff members and volunteers who find that they are humbled, challenged and fed by their involvement with Neighborhood Action.



[PHOTOS: Kathleen Doohar.]

Deacon Ron Tibbets, here with Janet, a food pantry guest, says he is “finding myself living into a tradition of servant ministry” at Neighborhood Action, Inc.

Just like everybody else

Sundays through Thursdays, the program provides a doorbell soup kitchen for lunch in the vestibule outside the parish hall. Volunteers like Kris Kossman of Trinity Church in Copley Square and Cliff Clarke are there to greet the guests and serve them their meal.

When she first started ladling out soup several months ago, Ms. Kossman didn't know what to expect. She was surprised by the flood of thank-yous she received from meal-goers.

“When they come here it's nice to give them respect and security,” Ms. Kossman said.

Rajiv Goodridge, a senior at Boston College High School and a member of the diocese's bishop suffragan search committee, also helped with the daily lunches during the summer. He is a choir member and assists at the altar as a subdeacon at Trinity Church in Randolph, where Deacon Tibbets serves on Sundays.

At first, Rajiv, a product of the suburbs, was nervous about handing out food to strangers waiting in the vestibule outside the church. He had never interacted so closely with poor and homeless people before. As the weeks went on, he gained a different perspective.

“Sometimes, [their situation is] not in their power, and I realize that just working at the window, and realize they're like everybody else, but they're just without a home,” Rajiv Goodridge said.

Neighborhood Action's reach extends beyond daily noontime meals. The Jubilee Senior Action Center (JSAC) offers Tuesday lunch and a variety of social, educational and recreational programs to senior citizens. On Wednesdays, Neighborhood Action offers the warmth and comfort of the parish hall for guests to dine and meet with medical and social service professionals.

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The program also hosts the city of Boston's Needle Exchange Program on Thursday evenings.

In fact, Thursday night is the culmination of the week, as volunteers from Roman Catholic, Mennonite and Episcopal congregations help cook and serve a dinner for approximately 100 guests.

Leaving theological or liturgical differences at the door, volunteers get to work in creating "a place of trust and certainty," as Deacon Tibbets put it. Sometimes, when he offers a mealtime prayer of thanksgiving for the presence of all gathered, he gets a round of applause in return.

Many hands

Deacon Tibbets hired Rich Chambers to cook the meals soon after he was appointed executive director of Neighborhood Action last April. Mr. Chambers says time is his biggest challenge in the kitchen, as he also juggles a Web-design business and painting on the side. His longest days are Thursdays because he stays to oversee the evening meal and to pick up any slack if volunteers are few.

He personally knows some of the people who come to Neighborhood Action for food and is sad to see them now fallen on hard times.

"I'm aware of their plight...you have to give something back," he said.

Jackie O'Sullivan, parish administrator of St. John's, keeps the books for Neighborhood Action and pitches in with cooking and serving meals when needed. When a homeless man arrived at a noonday lunch last August with three kittens he had found under a Somerville dumpster, Ms. O'Sullivan started working the phones to find an animal shelter.

The critical mass of experienced staff members and volunteers makes the program's ministry elastic, she said. It can expand to accommodate extra volunteers or still get everyone fed if there is a crisis and fewer people show up to help. The constant action and problem-solving nature of the job exhilarate Ms. O'Sullivan, who holds a Master of Divinity degree from Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge.

"You're not the little country vicar sitting amidst their books with a cat purring on your lap writing next week's sermon," she explained.

Numbers on the rise

Ms. O'Sullivan remembers vividly the day after politicians slashed city meal services. One hundred people showed up for noonday lunch, dozens more than usual.

Neighborhood Action served 1,700 meals during July and exceeded 2,000 meals in August. Its food pantry, open every Wednesday, now generates up to 150 bags

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of nonperishable groceries a month. Guests can visit the pantry as much as they need to, and I.D.'s are not required as they are at some other facilities. For many, the chance to walk and talk with others as they pick out the things they need is just as important as filling their bag.

Neighborhood Action collaborates with Ecclesia Ministries, which works to support and raise awareness about the needs of Boston's homeless population. The St. John's parish hall contains a clothes closet, Common Threads, which gives guests access to donated clothing and coupons to purchase clothing at Goodwill. Ecclesia's Common Art program also takes place at St. John's, giving homeless guests, seniors and parishioners a chance to express creativity in graphic arts.

"I'm trying to get our guests to understand that it is the church that provides for them and yet we're just regular folks out there trying to do our thing," Deacon Tibbets said.

A still, small voice

In 1990, Ron Tibbets was involved in a near-fatal car accident that radically changed his life perspective. He started to look into the ordination process for the diaconate—one of the three orders of ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church—even as he earned a living as a technical writer in corporate America. Through the outreach program of Trinity Church in Wrentham, he got involved with Common Cathedral and Ecclesia Ministries, which in turn sparked his interest in street ministry.

During his first year of the formation process, Deacon Tibbets drove Bishop Barbara C. Harris to various churches for her weekly visitations. Bishop Harris's manner and message lit a fire in him that burns to this day.

"Fortunately every visit's not 10 minutes away," Deacon Tibbets remembered. "You get to do the hour trips and all that. I think, just being with her, talking with her, laughing, joking, the tremendous sense of humor, being able to listen to her preach week after week and her different messages and how she moved in different communities...hearing what God calls us to be in our lives is something this person has lived through all the way to this place of bishop in Massachusetts. So yeah, I do need to be attentive, I do need to pay attention to that still, small voice inside, and she encouraged that. Her life is an example of responding to God's call."

Seeking and serving

David McGilvray, 62, regularly attends the weekly JSAC lunch for seniors. He is the spring chicken of the bunch compared to fellow participants Grace, just short of 100, Loretta, 75, and Savina, in her early 80's. Mr. McGilvray has no children or siblings and lost his wife to ovarian cancer several years ago.

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“It’s almost like a family meeting. I really enjoy it. I depend on it,” he said of the lunch program.

A 51-year-old homeless man says Deacon Tibbets is “the best thing that ever happened to this place...Since he’s come, I think this place has tripled...He hired a great cook...the food is a thousand times better than any place I’ve eaten at lately.”

Deacon Tibbets and others are fed because they are honored to have been trusted by their guests, even if they are sometimes startled by what they hear. And everyone has been transformed.

“The liturgy has a whole different sense for me,” Deacon Tibbets said. “When I hear [in the] baptismal covenant, ‘to seek and serve Christ in all people,’ and when I work at the doorbell ministry at the window during the day, you sometimes are challenged to find Christ in those people. It’s hard, but to know that it’s there is the real challenge, and to find joy in that, and make them feel welcome and know that I see Christ in them.”



A Neighborhood Action volunteer offers a plate to Roger, a guest. Neighborhood Action served more than 2,000 meals in August, stepping up to meet some of the shortfall in social services caused by government budget cuts.

Growth and challenge

Even in the midst of budget cuts, Neighborhood Action thrives, and people have begun to notice.

A part-time grant writer has been able to secure more funding. The diocese’s Bishops’ Annual Appeal and the national United Thank Offering have given money. A newly formed advisory board, in addition to vestry members at St. John’s, will allow for greater planning and independence.

The money situation is good, Jackie O’Sullivan says, and with Neighborhood Action’s first full-time executive director in place after a long time without one, she sees an opportunity to take the program “from survival, just barely sustaining itself, to growth and revisioning.”

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Still, members of Neighborhood Action know that they cannot rest. Programs need more staffing and financial resources. And while the Greater Boston Food Bank helps keep prices down, more donations to the pantry from individuals could provide for a broader selection of food.

Deacon Tibbets wants to see a separate pantry section for women and children, and dreams of holding the noonday meal inside the parish hall at least two days a week.

Perhaps the biggest proof that Neighborhood Action's ministry is bearing fruit despite the growing needs of the Boston poor is the new Bowls Program.

It will allow homeless persons, many who are eager to give back to those who give them so much, to get off the streets for a few hours and to work at finishing a rough wooden bowl, staining the inside and outside and leaving the top rim unfinished. The bowls are to be offerings of friendship from the thankful guests of Neighborhood Action to parishioners and other supporters, who can purchase the bowls for \$10 and continue the cycle of giving and receiving as members of Christ's body.

Describing the hospitable spirit of Neighborhood Action, one homeless visitor said "it makes everybody nice."

Neighborhood Action, as it reaches out to the marginalized, reminds one of the words of a classic gospel hymn: "There's a sweet, sweet spirit in this place, and I know it's the spirit of the Lord. ...Without a doubt we'll know that we have been revived, when we shall leave this place."

Jonathan Callard is a free-lance writer.