



Out and About

By Jane Charmelo

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Local church benefit aids disaster relief

The torrential rain and storms that produced flooding in the Midwest this past June may have ended, but the devastation and destruction still linger in their aftermath.

While such organizations as the federal Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the American Red Cross are among the first responders, others have recognized the need to offer assistance as well-the Lombard Church of the Brethren in York Center being among them.

On Saturday, Aug. 16, the church held an ice cream social with the focus of raising money to assist ongoing disaster relief efforts.

According to church Pastor Christy Waltersdorff, the money is earmarked for the Church of the Brethren's disaster relief ministry, which for "years and years" has volunteered for disaster clean-up and rebuilding.

She related that while other agencies are the first responders, Brethren volunteers "wait until the initial crisis is over and then go in and rebuild," adding that they work closely with such organizations as the Red Cross.

Brethren volunteers, she mentioned, go "wherever people are needing help."

Helping others in service is part of the Church of the Brethren foundation, Waltersdorff emphasized, adding that the church's teachings have "a lot of emphasis on peace and service."

The Church of the Brethren is a fairly young denomination, according to its Web site, www.brethren.org, which narrates how the church formed its roots in 1708, when European government had a "low tolerance for religious diversity."

A group of eight people-five men and three women-were among the dissenters who, despite the threat of persecution, lived their faith and gathered in Schwarzenau, Germany, to hold a baptism in the Eder River as a declaration of their faith.

That faith included practicing the tenets of the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus, including "peaceful action, plain and compassionate living and a shared search for truth," according to the Web site.

Fellow Brethren began to share their faith in other countries, and some emigrated to North America in 1719 under the leadership of a man named Peter Becker. By 1740, most of the European Brethren had also left, including Alexander Mack, one of the original eight members, who himself brought a group of Brethren to the United States in 1729.

The first congregation here formed in Germantown, Penn., in 1723, and sent missionaries around the rural areas of Philadelphia to preach, baptize and form new congregations.

New churches were organized in New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia during the 1700s and, after the Revolutionary War, congregations also formed in such states as Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri.

Kansas, Iowa and the West Coast would also see the spread of Church of the Brethren congregations by the mid-1800s, and a three-way split resulted in the largest branch, the German Baptist Brethren, changing its name to Church of the Brethren in 1908.

According to the church, the 20th century saw the denomination develop Sunday schools, camping and youth-oriented programs, and continue its emphasis on service, missions and peacemaking. The church created mission partnerships in other countries and today, Brethren

Volunteer Service workers do mission work in over a dozen countries throughout the world.

Currently, the Church of the Brethren estimates that there are about 135,000 members in more than 1,000 congregations in the United States and Puerto Rico; around 150,000 in Nigeria; and hundreds in the Dominican Republic and Brazil.

In addition to following the New Testament as disciples of Jesus, the Brethren also live their faith by responding to others in need, from soup kitchens to caring for the homeless. In fact, Waltersdorff stated, it was a Brethren who founded Heifer Project International, the organization that aids the poverty-stricken in the form of farm animals to provide them with a source of food and income.

A Church of the Brethren member named Dan West was the agency's founder, originally known as Heifers for Relief, after handing out rations of milk to hungry children during the Spanish Civil War.

He was quoted as saying, "These children don't need a cup, they need a cow," according to Heifer International's Web site (www.heifer.org). The outgrowth of his vision has resulted in assistance to just over 8 million people in more than 125 countries.

The Church of the Brethren has also been involved in such organizations as Church World Service (www.churchworldservice.org), which provides such relief as school, hygiene baby and emergency clean-up kits, and also is linked to the CROP Hunger Walks.

Waltersdorff, who has been the Lombard pastor for 12 1/2 years, said her congregation numbers about 100, and that they are a "very socially active group." In fact, she continued, at the church's inception, members met in a nearby house before building the first, then second buildings that are located on Luther Avenue just east of Westmore-Meyers Road and south of Roosevelt Road.

She noted, too, that a dome house across the street was also built by the Brethren, and at one time was, in their mission of service to others, used as transitional housing for the homeless.

Also in keeping with their focus on helping others, the

congregation decided to do something to aid in disaster relief after the onslaught of rain and subsequent destruction around the Midwest.

"We wanted to do something special to raise money," the pastor said, adding that she was impressed with their efforts. "They really took this seriously."

At the same time, it was "a way to reach out to the community," Waltersdorff added.

Guests at the ice cream social were greeted with an evening summer breeze and music by Glen Ayre, a trio playing Scottish-Irish music.

One of the members, Louise Brodie, playing fiddle and cello, is part of the Brethren congregation. Tony Janacek played guitar and Steve West played the Irish whistle as the trio's music wafted in the summer evening breeze.

The Sunday, Aug. 17, worship service also included a special offering to assist in Brethren flood relief.

Waltersdorff announced that the denomination's efforts, in 2007 alone, added up to five projects that included 1,554 volunteers who served 158 families and put in some 89,344 hours of volunteer work.

One Lombard Church of the Brethren member, Loren Habegger, has seen firsthand what havoc the flooding has wrought, after spending time in Franklin, Ind., where he helped paint a salvaged house that was being rehabbed.

"A lot of the houses in the city of Franklin were not [able to be saved]," he recounted, adding that the area had gotten "twelve inches of rain in just a few hours."

Habegger said he volunteered because it is part of "the personal philosophy" of the Brethren, adding, "If you can help, you should."

He encourages people to follow suit by becoming disaster relief volunteers, partly because "There's still a lot to be done."

At the same time, "We probably got as much out of it as the people we were helping," said Habegger, a Westmont resident.

Waltersdorff, in reciting the numbers that offer a testament to the work of Brethren disaster relief volunteers, commented that the movement is "an important ministry."

She also concluded that even though her congregation is not large in size, "I like to believe we are small but mighty."

For more information on Brethren disaster relief, or to make a donation, contact the church, 1S071 Luther, Lombard, at 630-627-7411.

Lombard, poetry both represent 'openness'

Sheila Bitts likens writing poetry to keeping a journal of sorts, only in a different format-and also says her poetry has what might be called an analogous connection to her Lombard roots.

The Chicago resident, who grew up in Lombard, has published some of her poems in a book entitled "Collected Poems: 1988-2008," which contains a variety of poems she said were first drafted in the mid-1990s, with "close to four years of editing and adding poems."

Bitts attended Westmore Elementary School, Jackson Junior High School and Willowbrook High School, where she said she began writing at age 16.

With her dad, Jerry Bitts, teaching English at the Villa Park high school, Bitts had to sign up for English classes with different teachers. However, she did have her dad for an elective creative writing class, since he was the only teacher available.

After graduating in 1987, Bitts attended Loyola University, where she majored in biology. She explained that she chose that route partly because "my sister was interested in biology as well."

Among her humanities classes at Loyola was a poetry class and when Bitts moved to California, she also took a University of California-Berkeley extension course in short story writing.

She lived for some six years in the state, first in Northern California and then in Southern California, working in prenatal diagnostics and cytogenetics.

Bitts said she came back to live in Chicago-just this past April-at the urging of her friends, and also to finish a book, both of which were "beckoning me back." She now works at Loyola Medical Center in Maywood and plans on attending graduate school.

Her book contains free-form poetry that sketches scenes in Chicago and California, among others, and includes a poem about Lombard called "Lombard Spring-Summer."

Her poetry covers a range of topics, from love, feminism and theology to tai chi poems, multiculturalism and a sonnet to Belmont Avenue in Chicago, among others.

Bitts said the poems are in reaction to her experiences, "kind of a reflection on what I do in my life."

"Instead of keeping a journal, I'd write a poem," chuckled the poet.

Bitts said that writing poetry, for her, is comparable to her experiences growing up in Lombard, and living across from Madison Meadow park. That is, she continued, looking out across the park gave her a feeling of "openness," which is how she sees her poems.

Also looking out toward the park, the July 4 fireworks and festivities would give way to quiet and calm along her street-even as traffic drove by, and "I always felt a sense of there being something out there to do."

"I have so many fond memories" of growing up in Lombard, Bitts said, adding that in addition to the wholesomeness and the reliability of favorites like Dairy Queen, "There was always something you [hadn't] yet discovered."

And that's what she would like readers to get from her poems-"a constant state of discovery and happiness."

The poet acknowledged that she doesn't know what the future holds (she's working on publishing some short stories) and yet, the anticipation of what might be around the corner is exciting.

Comparing Lombard with her poetry, "There's always something new to discover," she related.

"I'm going to be delighted at what I find," she stated.

"Collected Poems: 1988-2008" is available at Amazon.com and at the Trafford Publishing Web site, www.trafford.com/04-2788.