

Twin Cities Reader

THE NEWS, OPINION & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

VOLUME 10, ISSUE 8, MARCH 6-12, 1985



GEOFF HILL/STON

On the Front Lines Serving With Joy

By Neal Bernard

WHEN IT comes to the battle against hunger, Rev. Paul Aronopoulos likes to stay on the front lines. His Disciple's Ministry church on 1000 Oliver Ave. N. serves as headquarters of his war against poverty in north Minneapolis. Aronopoulos leads a charge of volunteers who serve hot meals, distribute free clothing and food, and feed transients on the city streets.

Aronopoulos, a balding, bearded man affectionately called "Pastor Paul" by his clients and helpers, runs his Pentecostal mission out of a traditional stone church building that's found new life with fresh paint and energy from its corps of volunteers. Jeanine Durand, administrator and public relations director for Disciple's Ministry, calls volunteers the "backbone of the ministry."

"We couldn't survive without them. I see how the ministry is pulling the northside together."

Volunteers of all ages and color come to the church daily to serve lunch and dinner to 600 people. Smiling faces and "praise the Lords" greet people as they enter what Pastor Paul suggests is "the largest ministry in the Midwest." No one gets paid for his or her work, yet hundreds turn out to scrub pots in the kitchen, stuff bags with groceries, or distribute free clothing. Anyone who steps through the church's doors is put to work.

"It gives a person a feeling of acceptance,"

said Pastor Paul. "Many young people don't know the joy of doing a good job."

There's plenty of joy to go around at Disciple's Ministry, which distributes 10,000 to 12,000 bags of groceries to the needy each month. Recipients come from as far away as Osseo and Richfield to get three bags filled with bread, meat and canned goods, as well as other food items that have been donated that month.

In addition to food donations from corporations, Disciple's Ministry needs \$300,000 a year to buy food and clothes. Most of the money comes from individuals, although the United Way contributed \$50,000 this year. Pastor Paul hopes to get the funds necessary to expand his operation into a warehouse, possibly the vacant Schweigert plant, to meet rising needs.

"We started here three years ago, and it's just taken off in the last two-and-a-half years," he said of the mission he moved from Brooklyn Park to the near northside.

According to Pastor Paul, the recent economic renaissance hasn't trickled down to the lower class yet.

"The reason we've seen the rise [in poverty] is higher taxes, layoffs, raises in utility costs and a cutback in aid. It's caused people to find other ways to feed themselves."

Last week hundreds of people lined up outside the church in springlike warmth for free pizzas donated by Pillsbury/Totines. Pastor Paul directed the human traffic and listened to requests from people who needed help. Between hugging and greeting people, he explained his motivation.

"It's the call of the Lord. We try to be a good example to others to provoke them to good works."

Pastor Paul uses a tough work ethic and a limitless store of energy to prod his volunteers to new heights of charity.

"I come from a background of hard work," said the pastor whose parents ran a restaurant. "I thrive on it. I tried to take a vacation once and got bored after 15 minutes."

Pastor Paul can't get bored when he ser-

Helpers assist in unloading and loading the ministry bus.

vices work at the church on weekdays, preaches Fridays and Sundays, and rides along with the "hot meals on wheels" bus every night. His wife, Jan, is equally ambitious in the ministry.

"I love it. I wouldn't trade it for anything," she said, while feeding transients. "We're doing something to help people. It's exciting when you see a life change."

Both Pastor Paul and his wife changed their lives in 1972 after they opened their home to young people involved in drugs and prostitution. Since then, Pastor Paul taught in Bible schools and evangelized in the Upper Midwest before creating Disciple's Ministry. A self-proclaimed "preacher/teacher/evangelist," he's never received formal training for his work, but to Pastor Paul, discipline and love carry more weight than a college degree.

"That [discipline] is what America needs now. It's part of our heritage that's been dropped along the way. We're coming back to those values out of a need."

Pastor Paul sees outstanding needs wherever he looks, and that means he's a busy man. He airs a daily message on KJLX radio, which is recorded on cassette tapes and sent to schools and seminaries in Africa. Although his message crosses the ocean, he continues to focus his efforts on his own backyard.

"You don't have to go overseas to start a mission. You can go to the northside," said Pastor Paul. "The difference between Africa and here is that no one sends money to the northside."

They do send potatoes, though. Last fall Disciple's Ministry gave away 80,000 pounds of potatoes in two-and-a-half hours. Durand couldn't believe the response.

"We worried about how we'd get rid of them," said Durand, "but children and grandmothers used whatever they could to drag the bags out of here."

Overwhelming crowds also come to the twice-weekly bread bus runs Disciple's Ministry sponsors at Emerson and Broadway in north Minneapolis. The line often stretches for three-quarters of block as people, including many elderly, wait for bags of bread and sweet rolls. No bus routes from that area pass the church. Since the people can't come to the food, Pastor Paul brings the food to the people.

These crowds prove to be fertile ground for Pastor Paul's message of salvation. He sees his urban ministry as a means of "getting in" to share the gospel.

"Our main message is that you must be born again," said Pastor Paul, who peppers his conversations with scripture verses. "I have led 45 people to the Lord outside the bread bus. You have to show people you are sincere. First you meet the people's natural needs, then their spiritual."

Unlike many food programs, Disciple's Ministry doesn't subject those seeking aid to an endless barrage of questions.

"About 2 percent of the people cheat consistently," he said. "You could waste 59 per-

cent of your money on administrative costs [to keep people from cheating]. It's hard enough to come in and stand in line. The humiliation is bad enough without asking questions."

Some hungry people avoid food shelves and soup kitchens regardless of whether questions are asked. Many prefer to keep to the streets, shying away from help centers like Disciple's Ministry. That's why Pastor Paul started the "hot meals on wheels" bus to catch these people who fall between the cracks.

Pastor Paul had a "vision" of repurposing a school bus so it could serve hot food to transients where they live. The white bus, with a mural of Jesus on the side, goes downtown every night at 5.

Street people migrate to the Seventh Street bridge near sundown as the fading sun reflects off the city skyline. They enter the 25-seat mobile dining room for a meal of hot soup, sandwiches, dessert and coffee. They talk quietly because eating is serious business. Twenty minutes later, two men come off the bus carrying coats and jackets from the bus's clothing rack, ready to face another night against the elements.

The bus sparks to life and rumbles across the muddy rail yard back to the Disciple's Ministry headquarters. The transients can't go home, but at least they know where to get one hot meal tomorrow.

On the Frontline

The battle against hunger and want is a continuing one, and you cannot always wait for the needy to find their way to the appropriate door. One area pastor and his flock have found innovative ways to bring assistance directly to those who need it.