

GROW: The Lord's call was hard to shake

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who hands out tons of food and just a bit of gospel. Checking in with Pastor Paul gives perspective about the community we live in. It's a lot sadder and sweeter and more diverse than we sometimes give it credit for being.

Once upon a time, Pastor Paul says, he was like a lot of us, with a regular mortgage, car payment and family.

Then, about a dozen years ago, the Lord came a-calling. "When the Lord calls, it's hard to shake him," says Pastor Paul, indicating he might have tried a dodge or two.

Anyway, the Lord called only Pastor Paul, not his wife or grown children. He went to work as an Assemblies of God minister, a move, he says that cost me my family."

But not his happiness. Happiness, says Pastor Paul, comes from giving. And it's hard to imagine anyone in the community with a bigger giving industry than Pastor Paul. He runs his industry with a little help from the government, a little help from some corporations and a lot of help from volunteers who have discovered the joys of giving.

The volunteers often include celebrities such as Minnesota Attorney General Hubert Humphrey III, who Pastor Paul says has been helping for years. Or near-celebrities, like the ex-pro boxer who was "volunteering" Thursday.

"Community service," muttered the man who once upon a time was just a couple of jabs shy of being a champ. "I got a hundred hours' community service. Boosting (stealing) cigarettes."

So help comes in all sorts of ways for Pastor Paul's giving industry, which was running full speed Thursday because 42,000 pounds of potatoes, imperfect but edible, had arrived, a gift from North Dakota farmers. They had been hauled in a Red Owl truck. (The company didn't charge the pastor for the truck or the driver.) Pastor Paul and the volunteers and the surprised driver, Ron Pierce, were giving as fast as they could. "When you pull a load, you never know what you're getting into," Pierce said as he looked over the sea of people representing a cross-section of cultures and races. He mopped his brow and smiled, clearly enjoying the job.

Down the street from the potato truck, other volunteers were busy handing out bags of groceries to whoever showed up for the daily grocery giveaway at the Disciples Ministry Church at 1000 Olive Av. N. in Minneapolis. (On Wednesday mornings, Pastor Paul does a grocery giveaway in St. Paul, and on Saturday mornings he holds a grocery giveaway in other Minneapolis locations. Those who need to know the time and place of giveaways or those who want to know how to contribute time, money or food may call 521-4665.)

In the church basement other volunteers were busy preparing the meals served there daily. The meals are served on typical church-basement tables. They're tables for four with plastic-flower centerpieces. Why, there are even decorative awnings on a wall. The script writing on the awnings reads: "Que pasa?"

"Ghi those at an old Holiday Inn

they were redecorating," said Pastor Paul of the awnings. "Suppose they had them in the bar or something. 'Que pasa?' means 'What's happening?' That seems just right for this neighborhood. Lots of blacks here, you know. 'What's happening?' see? I want this place to look good. A Hotel Sofitel for the poor, that's what I want. Tired of those dingy places that poor people have to go for food."

And for the people not being served a meal in the church basement, there's the Hobo Bus, kind of a meals-on-wheels approach to serving some of the people who call bridges and park benches home. The 1963 Chevy school bus has been gutted and made into a little rolling restaurant. If the hungry don't come to you, go to the hungry, is Pastor Paul's belief.

More than 400 meals a day are served by Pastor Paul and the gang, he says. Nearly 4 million pounds of food will be handed out in 1988, a church record, Pastor Paul says. Most of the food is contributed by small companies, lowly individuals, not corporations, he says.

As he talks about the record amount of food that will be handed out with no questions asked, he muses about how the Lord works in mysterious ways.

Take radio ratings, for example.

Pastor Paul once figured he could be

a pretty good radio minister. Maybe good enough to bring in more contributions for the food program. He figured he had that electronic-media sort of flair, you see. (Bald, sure. Fifty-five years old, yes. But still there's a styled ducktail hairdo. Not to mention tight jeans, open shirt, cowboy boots. Flair.)

But the flair didn't come across on radio. Either that or the station, KUXL, bounced his program to too many different time slots. Or people lost their trust in radio preachers. Whatever. The program bombed.

"I think, the Lord was telling me he wanted me here more of the time. So here I am," said Pastor Paul.

No regrets. No time for regrets because there's so much food pouring through, so many people who want the food. Sometimes, he said, the big-time charity outfits and service organizations criticize his program. It's not constructive, they say. It's just give, give, give. There are no lessons being taught. No instructions on bettering yourself. Just giving.

Why, Pastor Paul, who gets \$16,000 a year and an \$8,000 annual housing allowance, doesn't even appear to do much preaching, except on Sundays and on the grocery bags. The grocery bags are covered with pictures of Jesus, Bible verses and thank-yous to donors.

But mostly, there are no strings or

messages. Just free food. And that baffles people in this era of tough love.

"They call my approach a Band-Aid approach," he says of the big-time charitable organizations. "They like to say, 'Give a person a fish and he'll eat the fish and just be hungry again. Give the person a fishing line and he'll learn to catch his own fish.' That's nice, but what about the reality? Hungry people. You ever seen a hungry child? Learning to fish doesn't make much sense. First things first."

Other times, he said, people get awed by this operation that seems to grow and grow and grow. (Pastor Paul dreams of a being able to set up a national network of buses and Hotel Sofitels for the poor. In his dream, there'll be trucks coming in from Texas with damaged produce and returning with milk that must be used immediately because the expiration date is about to pop. And it'll all work smoothly because of his computerized system. Why, he points out, the computer is already in place. He gets special help with it from a man who donates his time. "In the business world, this man charges \$45 a half-hour," says Pastor Paul. So that's the dream.)

"People ask me, 'When's it going to end?' " he said. "I say, 'I suppose when people stop being hungry.' "

He doesn't figure to retire early.