On the Front Lines
Serving With Joy
By Neal Bernard

WHEN it comes to the battle against hunger, Rev. Paul Arapoosoa 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. Arapoosoa leads a charge of volunteers who serve hot meals, distribute free clothing and food, and feed transients on the city streets.

Arapoosoa, a beard-wearing man affectionately called "Pastor Paul" by his clients and helpers, runs his Provenchal mission out of a traditional stone church building that's found new life with fresh paint and energy from its corps of volunteers. Jeanne Durand, administrador 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 putting 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 says 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. Receipts come from as far away as Oswego 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 contribution of $50,000 this year. Pastor Paul hopes to expand his operation into a warehouse, possibly the vacant Schweppe 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 recession hasn't cranked 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 weather for free pizzas donated by Pillsbury/Tomato. Pastor Paul directed the human traffic and listened to requests from people who needed help. Between hugging and greeting people, he explained his mission.

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

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

"I come from a background of hard work," said the pastor, whose parents ran a restaurant.

"I think of it. I tried to take a vacation once and got bored after 15 minutes." Pastor Paul can't get bored when he supervises work at the church on weekdays, preaches Fridays and Sundays, and rides along with the "hot meals on wheels" 2-5 a.m. every night.

"I love it. I wouldn't trade it for anything," he 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 returning 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 KLDL 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 back yard.

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 50,000 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 grandparents used whatever they could to drag the bags out of here."

Oversized crowds also came to the twice weekly bread bus run Disciple's Ministry sponsors at Eastman and Broadway in north Minneapolis. The line often stretches for four hours 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 "planting an image to share the gospel."

"The main message is that you must be born again," said Pastor Paul, who preaches his convictions with scripture verses. "I have led 15 people to the Lord outside the bread bus. You have to show people you are sincere. You 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. Of the 28 percent of the people checked consistently, he said. "You could waste 59 percent 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 hard 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 reaping 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 sandyland where the fasting sun sets off the city skyline. They enter the 27-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 hooches and jackets from the bus's clothing rack, ready to face another night against the elements.

The bus stops at a park and rumbles across the muddy road back to the Disciple's Ministry headquarters. The transients can't go home, but at least they know where to get a hot meal tomorrow.

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.