Mission puts a little hope, humanity in food sacks

By Diana Estel Gonzalez
Staff Writer

Pam Beck kept her gnawed hands firmly in her pockets Wednesday morning as she endured five more frigid minutes of waiting in line for a free bag of groceries that would be Thanksgiving dinner for her and her 2-year-old son.

For nearly an hour, 34-year-old Pam Beck of northeastern Minneapolis and her neighbor, Marsha Main, waited along with several hundred other people for the doors of the Disciples Ministry Church Mission in north Minneapolis to open.

Waiting for Thanksgiving groceries was a first for both women, who said they weren’t able to have a good dinner without the extra help. Beck, who is divorced and has been receiving aid to Families with Dependent Children for three years, said $60 worth of monthly food stamps doesn’t go far.

Walt till Christmas. That is going to be awful, she said. “I don’t have two cents to pay anyone.”

Main said she and her husband had been going through hard times since her husband was injured in a car accident and lost his job. Both are looking for work, she said.

“He hasn’t been back to work yet,” she said. “We just spent our last $10 to pay an employment agency. We’re not on welfare yet, but it looks like that is next,” Main said.

The bag of groceries is going to be part of my daughter’s birthday dinner tonight. “We’re going to wrap Thanksgiving and her birthday into one,” she said.

Inside, the Rev. Paul Arapboisaid, standing by the line, trying to make smiles out of the shivering men and women, hugging them or shaking hands or giving them an affectionate slap on the back.

“Beyond a little humanity in this work, isn’t it like you can say, ‘Here’s your bag and I send people with the right kind of man’?,” he said.

After the 25th complaint about the cold, he shouted, “Wait a minute! I’ve got some hats, I’m going to get some hats.”

Within minutes he was back, eyeing the crowd.

“This is you!” he said to a long-haired woman. “Hey, that looks good on you, that’s your color.”

Another woman got a hat after she said Arapboi had lost her purse. Without hesitation, Arapboi began praying with her about the purse, disarming the crowd before him.

By early afternoon, the church had

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given away about 5,500 bags of groceries. The remaining 500 or so bags were given to elderly people living in apartment complexes or to families that will give the food to members who have been laid off.

Each bag contained either turkey dressings, a chicken, potatoes, onions, flour, creamed corn, bread or pie, extra such as candy bars, or in some cases, pizza.

Today, the church will be serving dinner starting at 2 p.m. to hundreds of people, Arapboi said.

Arapboi or Pastor Paul, as he calls himself — moved his small, nondenominational evangelical church from Brooklyn Park to the inner city about seven years ago.

“I started out with about five or four food bags, I’m up to 12,000 a month,” he said.

The church also runs a “hot box” that travels under the city’s bridges to offer hot meals to the homeless.

The mission’s programs will be expanding during the next few months, Arapboi said. By next year, church workers plan to open a combination food bank-workshop shelter at 232 Commercial St. in St. Paul. The building will have an enclosed dining facility, enough storage room for between 50 and 150 families, and a kitchen. In about six weeks, a halfway house will open at 724 Park Av. N, to help people make the transition from being homeless to supporting themselves with jobs.