

Buses bring hope to hungry

Church-run food giveaway helps 35,000 every month

By Clark Morphew
Staff Writer

The fruit and vegetables come by the crateful, slightly soggy and sometimes pale in comparison to the produce found in most markets.

Once a week, volunteers from the Disciples Ministry leave it out the back of an old blue bus, stack it on the sidewalk at the corner of Selby and Dale in St. Paul and give it away absolutely free.

Every Wednesday at noon, the people line up to receive a bag of bread and as much produce as they can carry home. And when they walk away with an armload, many are wearing a tentative smile, knowing hunger will not ruin the next few days of their family's life.

One man's ministry

It's the ministry of one man, the Rev. Paul Artopoulos, a self-taught Pentecostal preacher who got religion through a high-spirited conversion in 1972. Following the religious experience, Artopoulos sensed his future would be transformed. He closed down a janitorial service he owned in California and moved north to attend the Compassion Bible College in Fridley.

After a short course in Bible and theology, Artopoulos served small Pentecostal churches near Amery, Wis., and Brooklyn Park. For the past three years, he has been ministering to a small congregation in an abandoned Jewish synagogue at 1800 Oliver Avenue N., Minneapolis.

Since January, Artopoulos has been hauling food into St. Paul, hoping to bring some relief to the people of the area. It's only one tiny facet of his total operation that, he said, gives away millions of dollars in food every year.

On top of that, each day 500 people are fed a nourishing free lunch and dinner in the dining room of the church. Once a week, the dining room is reserved only for senior citizens, and they are served a special meal. Last week, it was turkey with all the traditional Thanksgiving trimmings.

Busloads of food

In addition to the St. Paul food giveaway, twice a week, the Disciples Ministry's bus stops at the corner of Emerson and Broadway in Minneapolis and hands out bags of bread products and produce. Each year at Christmas and Easter, 20,000 special bags of food filled with holiday fare are distributed to the poor in the church's neighborhood.

And there are holiday celebrations, too, where "Picnics for the Poor" serve food to more than 5,000 people on the Fourth of July, Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Artopoulos also operates a "hobo bus," which he parks under a viaduct in downtown Minneapolis at 5 p.m. everyday. Inside the brightly lit bus, street people find a miniature restaurant with booths and seats at a counter. There they get food, usually a hot bowl of soup, a sandwich and fruit.

The Disciples Ministry, which

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Photos by Keith Tolson/Staff Photographer

Above, Disciples Ministry volunteers pass out bags of bread and rolls during the weekly food distribution program in St. Paul's Selby-Dale neighborhood.

At right, produce distributed by the Minneapolis church is gladly received.

Below, the congregation's "hobo bus" gives a warm welcome and a good meal to all who come to its daily downtown Minneapolis location.

