Metro/State news

Poor find wealth of food and friendliness at mission

By Kate Faney
Staff Writer

The city's poor began to line up at the Rev. Paul Arnapolus' doors at 9 a.m. Wednesday — even though food had gone out long before that. Those doors in a former synagogue on the north side weren't going to stop before noon.

But there were people accustomed to waiting. By noon, there were thousands lined up around the Disciples Ministry building and down two blocks, testimony that poverty knows no race or age.

By 3 p.m., 5,000 would walk away with all the food they could carry — bags of bread, produce, meat, canned goods, soup from a donated milk carton. Nothing fancy. Just good plain food handed to them by Arnapolus and 35 volunteers.

"Merry Christmas," said the volunteer at the door, and a woman handed a toddler ahead while she reached for a bag.

"Merry Christmas," and a brawny man mumbled "Thank you" and hung his head.

"Merry Christmas," and a woman cringed and hid her face from the glare of a television camera recording her station in life for the evening news.

By 6 p.m., 5,000 would walk away with all the food they could carry — bags of bread, produce, meat, canned goods, soup from a donated milk carton. Nothing fancy. Just good plain food handed to them by Arnapolus and 35 volunteers.

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Bonding through the sea of grocery bags was Arnapolus, a man who gently spreads his gospel message between food and doughnuts. Oh, he gets it in all right — puts it on the cartons of frozen soup, which are his latest innovation in feeding the poor. But he does it deliberately.

Christmas charity is nothing new. What is new about Arnapolus and crew is that the giving goes on all year round — from trucks he pulls up to street corners and from the kitchens in his mission, the largest in the state, a place he calls "the House of the Poor."

Arnapolus, 54, a native of Dayton and former alcoholic who came "out of the Assembly of God" denomination, started a nondenominational ministry for born-again Christians in 1974. He started the mission seven years ago and the food giveaways four years ago. He does "a lot of begging" and "God just brings it in," he said.

Yesterday, God brought in sweet potatoes, meat, celery, cranberries, bread, canned goods, homemade soups and stews and pineapples.

"Merry Christmas," and two young women helped each other pick up the bulging bags.

"Merry Christmas," and an old fellow who seemed unsure of where he was suddenly felt a bag tied in his arms. He made the connection and his eyes lit up. He smiled at the volunteer.

Arnapolus watched the scene, visibly satisfied with what he'd wrought. "The gospel message is pretty shallow without practical outreach," he said.