

year through its weekly and daily street food giveaways which does not require registration.

"We started out with one bag," says Pastor Paul Arnopoulos, who founded the mission 20 years ago

and has developed it into the largest consistent bag giveaway in the United States. "Now we give out 40,000 monthly. And we get about 250-300 new registrants per month. There's no need for anyone to go

hungry."

To undertake such a large operation, the mission depends on volunteers, mostly church youth groups, to help with a number of tasks to keep it running smoothly.

Pastor Paul's can afford to pay just seven employees. Our group arrived at 9 a.m. and were immediately put to work double-bagging by mission Operations Manager Carolyn Lee.

*—OVER—* (See Paul's, page 3)

## Paul's

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Plastic bags are placed on the outside of brown paper grocery bags for added strength and to provide handles for easier carrying. Group members, in assembly-line fashion, put an open bag over the back of a chair, and then they put a plastic bag down over the top. The 1,500 bags we assembled in a few hours would last just four days.

Until last year, the mission provided hot meals for families, Lee says. But after Arnopoulos discovered a nation-wide network of free food from corporations, wholesalers and overloaded semi-trailers, the mission shifted its focus to grocery giveaways. Giving people food to take home also encourages them to eat as a family, Lee adds.

"It's the Lord's work," Arnopoulos says. "That's what's kept it going. And we try to give back by ministering to the people, mostly one-on-one."

While most of us were bagging, a few of the seventh-graders took turns handing a bag to recipients. A line formed at about 9:15 a.m., and

people steadily filed past the registration window until the stream died down to a trickle by 11 a.m. Each person is given a bag containing dry, non-perishable goods at the first stop, and individuals with children receive another bag containing milk, juice and other nutritious items on their way out.

Pastor Paul's does not turn anyone away and has few restrictions. Arnopoulos believes that anyone who humbles himself to fill out the five-page registration form is entitled to assistance. They do ask that recipients meet one of the following qualifications: are a family of two or more, disabled with proof or are more than 60 years old.

The mission has no geographic boundaries, unlike most Twin Cities food shelves. In fact, individuals come from as far away as St. Paul and the suburbs to take advantage of the service.

Once registered, individuals receive a verification card which is scanned into the computer each time they come to ensure they are

served just once per month. Lee says the mission sees more people as the month wears on and money from employment or assistance checks becomes scarce. Mission statistics show that 54 percent of its recipients are children. The average recipient family has four kids.

The young volunteers in our group had a chance to exchange a few words with recipients as they handed over bags. They discovered the individuals weren't much different from themselves. On the way home, they said the experience was fun and it had given them a new outlook. Many of them said they hoped to return.

Poverty does not discriminate between race and nationality as indicated by the mission's records. Arnopoulos listed a dozen nationalities which regularly show up at the church. On Tuesday, the primary breakdown in percentages was as follows: white 17, black 39, Asian 27 and Russian 13.

Many come just once or twice and are never seen again. Others are between jobs and need some extra

food until they find work again. The reason doesn't matter, but Arnopoulos says he expects to see an increase in numbers the mission assists. With recent legislation that significantly changed welfare benefits, he says the mission will see some negative effects. "It was so drastic, so sudden," Arnopoulos says, adding that food stamp programs also have been cut. "And, there's more (cuts) coming."

Arnopoulos says the need could justify doubling the operation, but finances and space prohibit expansion. That's why a temporary job service has been added to the mission. Employees of the service receive a lunch and are transported to a job site for a 90-day period in hopes of proving to an employer that they are worth hiring full time. It's probably the best way to wean people from depending on the mission and other forms assistance, Arnopoulos says.

Meanwhile, Pastor Paul's will continue to provide food to those who need it. And at the same time, its volunteers will gain a better appreciation of how people are given different lots in life.