year through its weekly and daily street food giveaways which does not require registration. “We started out with one bag,” says Pastor Paul Armpolous, 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.

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Paul’s

(Continued from page 1)

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 Armpolous 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.

Pastor Paul’s does not turn anyone away and has few restrictions. Armpolous believes that anyone who humbly offers 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 barriers, 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 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. Armpolous 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 Armpolous 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,” Armpolous says, adding that food stamp programs also have cut. “And there’s more (cuts) coming.”

Armpolous 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 keep people from depending on the mission and other forms of assistance, Armpolous 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.