

MIDEAST VOICES



Mideast Voice of the Poor, Columbus, OH

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Welcome Back

By Warren Wright

Vincentians and Friends,

Welcome to this 3rd Edition of *Mideast Voices*! April 23rd marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of our founder, Blessed Frederic Ozanam. Everyone in the Mideast region has the opportunity to celebrate Blessed Frederic's birthday at our mini-Regional Meetings. With the Lansing Council as host, the first took place in Lansing, MI on April 20. A film on Blessed Frederic produced by Saint Vincent de Paul Australia and highlighting Frederic's commitment to charity and justice, was shown to the 70 Vincentians in attendance. Good discussion followed. Karen Holcomb-Merrill, Policy Director at the Michigan League for Public Policy, made an enlightening presentation on poverty issues and how they are or are not being addressed in the Michigan. More specifics of Mrs. Holcomb Merrill's comments are discussed in this issue. Attendees left the gathering energized to advocate on behalf of those we serve with their state and federal legislators.

For those in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky, mini-Regional meetings will take place on June 8 in Columbus, OH

Summary of 2013 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering

By Warren Wright

The Catholic Social Ministry Gathering (CSMG) took place in Washington, DC from February 10 to 13, 2013. It was a great opportunity for prayer, reflection, and action on issues that are currently in the spotlight on Capitol Hill. Featured speakers were Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston and economist Charles Clark of St. John's University. Issue briefings and workshops were conducted. Fr. Jim Martin, SJ entertained the group with a discussion of the importance of humor and joy in the spiritual life. The gathering opened and closed with uplifting multi-cultural liturgies. SVDP Voice of the Poor Committee had a meeting on the evening of

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and June 29 in Indianapolis, IN. Registration is now open. The day will include the same film shown in Lansing and presentations on poverty issues in Ohio (Columbus) and Indiana/Kentucky (Indianapolis). Please consider attending.

As this newsletter comes to press, the US Congress is shaping Immigration Reform legislation as well as the 2013 Farm Bill. Stay tuned for action alerts THIS WEEK on both of these issues.

Blessings,

Warren Wright
Mideast VOP rep

February 11 to evaluate activities for the upcoming year.

The legislative priorities this year were: Placing a Circle of Protection around programs for the poor and vulnerable in ALL budget decisions and passing comprehensive immigration reform that upholds the dignity of the human person by offering a pathway to citizenship for person currently here without documents, streamlining family reunification, supporting low-skilled workers seeking work here, and implementing provisions similar to those of the DREAM act for minor children of undocumented immigrants. On February 12,

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Indiana Catholic Conference

By Deb Zabloudil

The Indiana Catholic Action Network (I-CAN) reports that the Indiana State Legislature had a productive session that ended in late April. A great deal of work was done by legislators who were able to work in a bipartisan fashion. In the process, they were able to accomplish the following that will help the clients we serve. While more needs to be done, the doors have not been closed and I-CAN will continue to advocate on behalf of those living in poverty.

Medicaid expansion was left to the Governor to determine with the Federal authorities. The outcome of the health care for poor families, mostly working poor, is uncertain. It is hoped that with some flexibility

CCHD Pilot Project

By Warren Wright and Elaine Damo

With funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), the Columbus VOP committee has undertaken a pilot project aimed at providing participants with an orientation in justice and organizing to advocate for social change. Nine (9) of our members were trained on the Biblical and interpersonal basis of justice as well as conducting one-to-ones. The training was provided by organizers from Columbus BREAD (Building Responsibility, Equality, and Dignity). The group then conducted one-to-ones with those we serve as well as other community leaders. We attended the April BREAD rally and the May BREAD Nehemiah action. One of our members, Elaine Damo, offers a reflection on her experience below.

Reflection – Opening New Doors: *Why do you volunteer? Over the years, I've volunteered because I had to (resume building), because I wanted to (in my children's classrooms), or simply because I could (I had the time, wherewithal, and opportunity). But during B.R.E.A.D. home visit training three months ago, our trainer wanted to know what my self-interests were in volunteering for this project. What am I getting out of it?*



granted by the Federal program the Governor will find a way to extend coverage for these families. The attempt to lower eligibility for prenatal coverage was stopped. Mothers will still be eligible up to 200 % of poverty.

In the end the Senate and House could not agree on the drug testing for TANF assistance, HB 1483. The bill died as the author was unwilling to accommodate a Senate provision to allow a third party to receive the benefit when children were involved.

I answered that my self-interest was to try and get a step closer to Heaven by working on this social justice project. In all actuality, though, I've found that working through the Nehemiah Action process has exposed me to new opportunities and opened more doors than I could have ever imagined.

B.R.E.A.D. stands for Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity. Its mission is to harness the power of people of faith to solve community problems. Its volunteers (mostly congregations) share a calling to pursue justice in God's name. The organization presses public decision-makers to implement solutions to agreed-upon community problems. In the spirit of Nehemiah the prophet, who called a great assembly to confront public officials about injustices against workers in Jerusalem, thousands of people gather in Columbus every May to get commitments to action from public decision-makers. The process works, and I'm proud to be one of its volunteers.

Having done several one-to-one visits, I can now

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Poverty in Michigan

By Warren Wright

Mrs. Karen Holcomb–Merrill presented some sobering data on April 20, 2013 to those gathered for the Michigan mini-Regional Meeting. For families in Michigan, median income is down 20%, poverty is up 66%, and the state ranks in the top 10 for unemployment. Income disparities are at the highest level since the Great Depression. Children continue to disproportionately bear the poverty burden.

Why have these conditions come about?

- In an attempt to foster economic growth, Michigan has shifted the tax burden from businesses to individuals.
- Between 2011 and 2012, the typical Earned Income Tax Credit benefit for low income workers has dropped 70% – from \$439 to \$132
- State budgets are failing to prioritize low-income and working families; from FY2003 to FY2013, all state-funded services have been cut over the last decade except Corrections (21% Increase) and community health (53% increase)



[Poverty U.S.A.](#) is an initiative of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.

- Federal cuts through sequestration
- Lowlights of this year’s legislative session:
- The governor cut human services funding by 10% in his budget
 - The legislature has rejected funding for Medicaid Expansion, Dental Care, and Mental Health Services for veterans

What can we do? Contact your legislators, write letters to the editor and op/ed pieces which support:

- Restoration of unemployment benefits and indexing them to inflation.

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Speaking about Social Concerns

By Gary Schwarzmuller

People will not become advocates for change until they first understand the scope of a problem. To that end, speakers with expertise in three areas of current social concern were invited to speak at St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church three Sundays in April.

On April 7, Angela Johnston, Director of the Catholic Diocese of Columbus Latino Ministry Office, and members of the Justice for Immigrants Committee spoke on the need for comprehensive immigration policy reform. A short DVD examined why migrants are willing to leave their homes and risk their lives in order to provide for their families. The session included some concrete examples of what one parish was doing to be welcoming and supportive of migrants in their area. Current teaching from the USCCB was also shared.

On April 14, Theresa Flores, a Human Trafficking Survivor, Author and Victim’s Advocate spoke on the extent of human trafficking in the United States. She began by discussing how the constant bombardment of sexual images in advertising, the media and pop culture feeds the “demand” for prostitution, much of which is forced. She shared the chilling fact that girls, ages 12 to 14 are most often targeted for entrapment into sexual slavery. She shared several of the techniques used to entrap these victims. The message was driven home when she shared her personal story. The session ended with examples of how we can become part of the solution. We can all “push back” by telling advertisers who use sexual imagery that we will not buy their products and we will tell our friends to do likewise. Supporting and engaging in the work of the foundation she founded – S. O. A. P. (Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution), is another way that men and women are

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state delegations, including delegations from Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio, took these priorities to representatives and Senators on Capitol Hill. To reinforce the message, we are encouraged to take these same priorities to our US representatives and Senators in our home district offices. Please consider doing so in the next three months, as these issues continue to be high priority in the national debate. Issue materials from the CSMG are available for your use.

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fighting back. Drives to help in identifying victims and providing them with ways to break free are held – with special emphasis on events where large numbers of men will be in attendance – such as NASCAR races, the Super Bowl, and other sporting events. We can all do something to help.

On April 21, Matt Habash, President and CEO of the Mid-Ohio Food Bank, talked about hunger in our midst. Since 1980, the Mid-Ohio Food Bank has been working with grocers, food companies, Ohio farmers, the USDA, and community partners to obtain food and distribute it to more than 550 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, after-school programs, and senior housing sites across 20 counties in central and eastern Ohio. It is not just an inner-city problem but very evident in suburban and rural areas as well. In the United States, one in five children live in food-insecure homes. One in six Americans are food-insecure. In

“There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.”

– Archbishop Oscar Romero

The 2014 CSMG will take place in Washington, DC February 2 to 5, 2013 at the Omni Shoreham Hotel. SVDP has been well-represented at the last few CSMGs, but we can do better. Please consider putting this event on your calendar next year and petitioning your SVDP Council for financial support to attend. You will come back energized and with the information needed to lead VOP advocacy efforts in your area.

the area served by the Mid-Ohio Food Bank, children and seniors comprise over half the recipients, with the needs of seniors projected to rise in the next decade. The needs are increasing. The amount of food provided by the Mid-Ohio Food Bank increased 13 percent since 2011.

After identifying the scope of the problem, much of the session dealt with the ways the food-bank industry is changing. Today over half of the food provided is fresh. That has required many changes in operation at food banks and partner agencies such as acquisition of refrigerated trucks to pick up and distribute fresh produce and acquisition of refrigerators at partner agencies to keep the produce fresh. Another major change was working with farmers who leave millions of tons of produce in the fields due to over production or the demand by retail outlets for only produce that is a certain size or color. Food banks now collect much of that produce by directly paying the farm workers to pick the crops that the food banks then pick up and distribute.

After these three sessions, there are more than 150 individuals (unduplicated) who are better able to advocate on at least one of these issues. Consider hosting something similar in your parish or diocese.

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- Restore an effective Earned Income Tax Credit
- Raise the minimum wage to a level that lifts a family of four out of poverty (\$24,000 or about \$10.50 per hour)
- Raise the eligibility and adjust the sliding scale for the child care subsidy
- Expand Medicaid

THE BUDGET IS A MORAL DOCUMENT – PASS A STATE BUDGET THAT REFLECTS OUR PRIORITIES FOR THE COMMON GOOD

CCHD from page 2

articulate my self-interests in this social justice project. The doors that opened to me have been numerous. First of all, I met some amazing people. I thought conducting one-to-one visits with people served by our Saint Vincent DePaul Food Pantry was out of my comfort zone, but I was wrong. Having casual conversations about the challenges these people face was easy and enlightening. I learned about “Joyce” who lost her business during the economic downturn yet is still trying to help the disadvantaged by conducting cooking classes so they don’t rely on costly processed foods or eating out. I learned about “Tom” who is raising his grandchildren in his retirement years because their mother got involved with drugs and couldn’t care for them. I learned about “Nancy” who is raising a grandchild with special needs; Nancy sleeps on the couch in their one bedroom apartment so her grandson can get a good night’s sleep in the bedroom. These are caring people who put others’ needs before their own. They have graciously accepted the hands they were dealt, but society can and should do more for them.

Also, this process has made me feel like I can be part of the solution. I can help tackle the overwhelming problems of poverty one issue at a time -- through the strength of the unified voice. By bringing together people who are passionate about helping others, this justice ministry can enact positive change and make a difference in the lives of those we serve.

So why do I volunteer? We’re taught to see the face of Jesus in everyone we meet. I volunteer because the people I meet truly ARE the face of Jesus. Why do you volunteer? Maybe the answer will open new doors for you too.

VOP will be conducting an evaluation of the pilot project in June with a staff person from CCHD. We will also hear from leaders of the Detroit Action Commonwealth, a CCHD-funded organization that organized formerly homeless persons who have become leaders in their community. It is anticipated that Columbus SVdP will apply for a CCHD grant in November that would be used to hire an organizer to form an organization to be led by those we serve. The organization would advocate for justice on issues they decide on.

News from Kentucky – Farm Bill Action needed

By Catholic Conference of Kentucky

Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI stated that “Liberation from the yoke of hunger is the first concrete expression of the right to life.” The U.S. bishops and their Catholic partners also remind Congress that food is a fundamental human right. In their recent letter they stated, “This is a crucial time to build a more just framework that puts poor and hungry people first, serves small and moderate-sized family farms, promotes sustainable stewardship of the land and helps vulnerable farmers and rural communities both at home and in developing countries.”

The USCCB and other Catholic organizations also recently joined with an additional 100 organizations, urging Congress to support and protect the SNAP (formerly call the Food Stamp) program from cuts and changes that would harm vulnerable and hungry people in need.

The Catholic community brings both deeply rooted principles and experience to this debate. Through many programs and ministries rooted in our faith tradition, we feed and assist millions of people living in poverty both at home around the world, support rural communities and farmers in need, and help promote policies to care for creation.

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"Freedom from the yoke of hunger is the first concrete manifestation of that right to life which, although solemnly proclaimed, often remains far from being effectively implemented."

-- Pope Benedict XVI, World Food Day 2011

Voice of the Poor (VOP) Voice of the Poor does not take positions for or against a political party or individual candidates. However, Voice of the Poor is interested in working with those elected officials, whether Republicans or Democrats, who support initiatives that will benefit the poor, children, elderly, immigrants – documented or not, and all of those who SVdP cares for and serves.

We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

<http://www.vincentianvoice.org/voceofpoor.html>

Kentucky from page 5

The Farm Bill affects us all, but most importantly, it impacts those who are hungry, living in poverty, and struggling to keep farming a viable way of life. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in partnership with Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief Services and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, supports important provisions in the 2013 Farm Bill that uphold the life and dignity of the human person and promote stewardship of creation.

To learn more about the current Farm Bill, visit the [US Conference of Catholic Bishops web site](#) – and [take action now!](#)

*How I would like a Church
which is poor
and
for the poor!*
Pope Francis (on choosing his name)

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