

## Features



Six-year-old Mary Farr digs into her turkey dinner.

## Parish harvests help for needy

By Richard A. Kiley

With all due respect to proprietors of Chemung County's Arnot Mall, the place to do some early Christmas shopping and fill up on some good food last weekend was St. Mary Our Mother Church in Horseheads.

The parish's Social Ministry Committee hosted a Harvest Dinner and Alternative Christmas Idea Fair Saturday, Nov. 14, to get parishioners thinking about the needy both locally and in the Third World.

Young and old representing many denominations came out from all over the Southern Tier on the unseasonably warm Saturday to sample turkey, stuffing, pumpkin pie and other traditional Thanksgiving favorites as the parish successfully proved it could fight poverty and hunger ecumenically.

Father Bob Ring, associate pastor, initiated the idea of having the alternative fair in order to "Christianize" the holidays, after he read about similar successful ventures elsewhere. His concept was then enthusiastically supported by the parish's Social Ministry Committee.

In the event that the alternative fair might not prove a big enough drawing card for parishioners, committee members — along with Father Ring — decided to combine the fair with a harvest dinner.

"Food seems to bring a lot more people out," quipped Carole Carr, who was one of the organizers of the fair.

And come out they did. According to Larry Mochrie, chairman of the committee organizing the harvest dinner, approximately 700 meals were served. Besides their food, parishioners also absorbed information from many local and Third World organizations that are continually trying to make Christmas better for the needy.

"We decided to go ahead with (the fair) because there was too much affluence out there, and there are too many people untouched by Christmas," Farr said.

In addition to such local support networks as the Southern Tier Food Bank, the food cupboard, the food pantry, Hospice and Right to Life, visitors to the fair had an opportunity to learn more about two unusual organizations, SERV (Self Employment Refugee Vocation) and the Heifer Project International.

SERV attempts to eliminate the exploitation of native workers by obtaining fair-market prices for handcrafted items from such countries as Kenya and Thailand.

Carved wooden items, which were mostly in tune with the nativity scene in Bethlehem, were displayed at the fair. Among other goods on hand were papier-mache and woven items as well as handmade holiday ornaments.

Local youths were encouraged to buy such gifts as gingerbread men, pins and other articles offered for sale. Children could also purchase coupons promising to do household tasks and chores to help their parents get through the hectic holiday season.

According to Farr, 20 percent of the money spent on the handcrafted items is put toward local needs, and the remaining funds go directly to those who made the novelties.

The Heifer Project International also fosters self-reliance in the Third World by sending livestock to areas of desperate poverty. According to Father Ring, project organizers also teach farmers how to raise their own food. Farmers who receive livestock from the project, moreover, must send one of the first animals born

to another poor family to give them a new food source.

Mochrie said the sense of togetherness that pervaded the dinner was overwhelming.

"There was a real sense of community in getting all these people together," said Mochrie, who is in his second term on the parish social ministry committee. Mochrie added that attendance at the harvest dinner — which featured the theme "Who Is Our Neighbor?" — was a dramatic improvement over the dinner three years ago.

"We had a little more planning this year; there was a lot more advertising," Mochrie said. "The (low) price for it was also a big factor," Mochrie added, noting that this year's meal cost the same as the last one.

In the spirit of the dinner, many parishioners also donated money to people who couldn't afford to come on their own.

The success of the harvest dinner this year has proven to organizers at the Horseheads parish that the event can also be viable annually.

"We decided at the last (Social Ministry Committee) meeting before the dinner to make the harvest dinner an annual event," Mochrie said. After the dinner, a number of pleased parishioners asked how they could help with next year's preparations.

"A lot of volunteer help is needed with big events like this; I was just amazed at how many people came forward at the end to offer their help," Mochrie said. "We need the help if we're going to have events like this."

And although not everyone who ate in the gym walked over to the fair in the auditorium, Father Ring believed the endeavor proved a worthy one.

"There are a lot of people unaware of these organizations all together," Father Ring said. "Even if just a few more people became aware of these groups, (the fair) helped them."



Carl Savino greets his good friend Skeet Fox after the meal.

Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal



Diane Nowak serves up more food for fellow parishioners attending the event.



More than 700 people turned out for the Alternative Christmas Fair and Harvest Dinner.

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