

ELCA Macedonia Project

In the Market for Mission

Stewardship planners in the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin recognize the value of “taking it to the streets.” Enter the Dane County Farmers’ Market.

As part of its work in the Macedonia Project, the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin secured a non-profit booth in the market in order to spread the good news about what the ELCA is doing in Madison, across the country and throughout the world. In order to do this, they chose ELCA World Hunger as a catalyst for conversation.

The synod sent out an invitation to all its congregations, inviting them to send volunteers to run the booth. Over 40 volunteers signed up and participated from June through early November, some of them more than once, including active and retired pastors, lay leaders and local students active in campus ministry.

A student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Amy Larson, coordinated volunteer efforts. She and others carried a simple message to curious passers-by. They would offer patrons a free, blue ELCA World Hunger canvas bag in which to carry their produce. They let people know that the ELCA was active in anti-hunger and anti-poverty ministries locally, nationally and globally. If a person engaged in conversation, a volunteer might then say, “There are 145 congregations in the 12 counties around Madison. Do you have a church home? If not, we would be glad to help you choose one.”

The Rev. Sara Yotter, assistant to the bishop in the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin, commented on her recent visit to the market. “It was remarkable to see the interactions with people and to be a part of it. A college student said to me, ‘This is so cool. Do you have ways that I could volunteer?’”

The Dane County Farmers’ Market sees more than 500,000 people each summer in its unique locale on the grounds of the state Capitol. Volunteers at the synod booth recorded over 1,500 direct conversations from June to November. Though numbers were not recorded prior to June, staff at the synod office and the Lutheran Public Policy of Wisconsin ran the booth in the early weeks of the market and engaged many more people than.

People who stopped by the booth included ELCA members glad to know about their church’s involvement locally, some church members from other denominations, and some who were not members of any church.

“Some people would tell us their stories about traveling internationally,” said Yotter. “Madison is a pretty diverse community because of the university. Some people whose home was outside the country would ask, ‘Are you doing work in my country?’ We were as well-versed as we could be in stories of the church to be able to say, ‘This is what we’re doing there.’ I talked to one woman who had worked in Japan for a long time, and I told her about the ELCA’s work with disaster response in Japan, and she had no idea that the church was doing things like that.”

Plenty of people wanted to give money on the spot, Yotter said, but market rules don’t permit that kind of direct giving. Volunteers handed out an ELCA World Hunger offering envelope with a code that allows the ELCA World Hunger program to track gifts specifically that came in from the market.

“One of my favorite things to do was to hand out God’s Global Barnyard barn-shaped coin banks to kids,” said Stephanie McCarthy, who volunteered at the booth. “Kids would wander by and stare at the banks. We would ask, ‘Do you want a barn?’ And they would respond enthusiastically, ‘Yeah!’ It was the coolest thing ever.”

“Often parents would be with these kids, and sometimes parents would say, ‘You know at home we talk about how not everyone has enough to eat.’ In some cases our booth was an extension of a conversation that was already happening in people’s homes,” said McCarthy. “In other cases, it was brand new to the whole family, and they were excited to have a way to engage the kids more on their level, too. Because how do you talk to a 7-year-old about world hunger? That can be challenging.”

“This ministry is outside the walls of our congregations, which we think is really important,” said Yotter. “It is to target an audience of people who care about sustainable initiatives, something ELCA World Hunger does well. We as a church don’t just want to give handouts; we want to help people have abundant life on their own. So this is a target audience that cares about what we do but maybe doesn’t know that we are doing it.”

“Every time I left from volunteering at the booth I felt I’d done something good and purposeful and helpful,” said McCarthy. “I think we forget how much living out the gospel is about relationships. Even if that relationship is 10 minutes at a farmers’ market, we’re still able to share the message and spread the good news with someone. It’s a hopeful thing.”