LEFSA — Providing Hope & Empowerment for Thirty Years

Having a milestone anniversary is always cause for celebration, and celebrating 30 years for an organization is an even better reason. In 1986, Sr. Dorothy Gallant, a Sister of Charity of New York, and Sr. Teresa Skehan, a Religious Sister of Mercy, literally started walking the streets in some of the toughest neighborhoods in Manhattan. They had sandwiches to distribute, but more importantly, they offered their gift of listening—hearing the needs of those sleeping on the street, in the parks, in the shelters. The sisters knew there were organizations that could provide information on shelters, food pantries, and other social services, but they recognized a different need: the need to listen to, to pray with, or just to “be” with someone in such despair and hopelessness, treating each one with respect and dignity. That is how “Life Experience and Faith Sharing Associates” (LEFSA) was born.

These sisters had no strategic plan, no budget, no executive board. They saw a need and went about making it happen. Over the years, they rented small “office” spaces in apartment buildings, churches, or halls, whatever could be fashioned into something that was inexpensive and serviceable.

Fast forward 30 years and today, LEFSA has grown to include an executive director, Karolina May, who with a team of seven, continues the ministry that Sisters Dorothy and Teresa began. LEFSA follows a Base Christian Community Model. This model allows for faith-based community gatherings within city-sponsored shelters, as well as a weekly street ministry. The gatherings are interdenominational, voluntary in nature, and based on an empowerment model. Participants help to plan and assist in facilitating the gatherings.

These gatherings provide a forum wherein people who are homeless come together to share life and faith experiences, talk about problems related to homelessness, and work within a supportive faith community toward emerging from their situation. LEFSA now serves approximately 3,000 New Yorkers in shelters and on the streets each year.

Although Sr. Dorothy and Sr. Teresa have both gone home to God, we can only imagine how pleased they would be to see such growth and success. Through the generosity of one supporter, LEFSA moved into their permanent home this summer. This timely gift arrived when office space was available in a Sisters of Charity Housing Development Corporation (www.sistersofcharityhousing.org) building. This organization promotes social justice by providing affordable supportive housing for some of the city’s most vulnerable residents.

Help us celebrate with LEFSA this September at an event we will be hosting on September 22, 2016 at Helen Mills Event Space and Theater. For more information, please visit LEFSA’s website at www.scny-lefsa.org.

Book Review: Prominent Theologian Cites Congregation’s Contributions to Local Church

Since the Second Vatican Council, the image of the Church as the people of God has been part of Catholic self-understanding. But what practical difference has it made? How have Church structures changed—or have they—so that adult Catholics can live their baptismal call to be prophetic disciples?

In Prophetic Obedience: Ecclesiology for a Dialogical Church (Orbis Books, 2016) Bradford Hinze explores these questions as he develops a theology of prophetic discipleship. He illustrates it with concrete examples of groups that took to heart (“received,” in theology-speak) the Council’s vision of the people of God, empowered by the Spirit to see and respond to the signs of the times.

Dr. Hinze, professor of theology at Fordham and current president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, draws his examples from the Archdiocese of New York: parish and pastoral councils, consultative groups of priests and religious, and community-based movements such as the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, among others. In most of them, Sisters of Charity were involved as leaders and/or supporters in the decades after the Council.

Women’s religious communities, Dr. Hinze believes, led the way in implementing Vatican II’s teaching on the people of God. From the many congregations in the Archdiocese, he highlights the Sisters of Charity of New York. Drawing on our written and lived history, he documents our efforts at renewal even before the Council mandated it.

He cites leaders like Mother Loretto Bernard Beagan and Sister Margaret Dowling who opened us to new currents of thinking and new ways of ministering. He reminds us of the Chapters and Assemblies that grappled with questions of identity and mission. He recognizes the hard work of revamping structures that laid the foundation for fostering members’ diverse gifts, encouraging broad participation, and cultivating communal processes of dialogue and discernment.

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