

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

INNER-CITY MISSION



Lutheran Church of the Master members pack a week's supply of food for Mission for All Nations as part of an Urban Plunge. From left are Melissa Jones, Stephanie Branchaud and Alli Van Roekel.

Seeing the hardships and perseverance of others gives youth group members a different viewpoint.

BY JAIME POTTHAST
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Alli Van Roekel can sum up the Urban Plunge in one word — courage.

"Courage of those serving every day through ministry and courage of those trying to get their lives back on track," she said. "I found so much inspiration in them."

Van Roekel, 31, is youth leader at Lutheran Church of the Master. The church's youth group was one of several that participated recently in an Urban Plunge.

The weekend events are designed to bring participants from the suburbs or small towns to Omaha's inner city. Christ for the City International sponsors the events.

Groups recently have braved cold weather to get hands-on experience with nine different faith-based social service agencies working in north and south Omaha.

Visiting these places was something new and different for her group, said Sara Thomsen, a member of Southwest Church of Christ.

"I've never been that exposed to that side of Omaha," said Thomsen, 17. "It was very eye-opening."

The experience helped Thomsen and fellow attendees understand the challenges some Omahans face, she said.

Visiting Empty Tomb Church — where
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Above, Southwest Church of Christ member Sam Thomsen. At left, Lutheran Church of the Master members Kaitlin Johnson and Stephanie Branchaud assemble goodie bags for Angels on Wheels.

INNER-CITY MISSION

Mission: Others inspire youths

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participants helped fill and hand out grocery bags — was Thomsen's favorite part of the plunge.

Empty Tomb is a church on South 24th Street that gives groceries and clothes to Sunday worshippers.

Many who attended when she was there were homeless, Thomsen said. That gave the service a completely different feel, which was something she enjoyed.

"It was an amazing service," she said. "Everyone was really grateful."

Van Roekel said it was the first time her group had gone, but it's something she'd like to continue.

"It's different to do missions in your own area," she said. "You get connected with those people and want to follow up with them."

JOURNAL EXCERPTS

During recent weekend urban plunges, participants wrote about their experiences in journals. Here's a sample of their entries:

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE MASTER

Kaitlin Johnson

Walking around the streets of north Omaha at night in the cold would not be my first choice whatsoever, but when praying and doing it you don't even think about all that other stuff. Praying is the most powerful thing you can do.

Alli Van Roekel — Leader

Though I've been here several times before, this visit (to the Open Door Mission) is one of the most meaningful to me. . . . We all got to know (Chris, a young man staying there) and basically became instant friends. Chris has recently graduated from our foster care system and is trying to start his own life. We told him about our church and gave him the address and to our surprise, he came to worship the next Sunday! I just hope that Chris will start a new life — and I truly hope he will use Christ as his foundation to build from.

SOUTHWEST CHURCH OF CHRIST

Sharon Thomsen

The tiny storefront (of Mission For All Nations) belies the vast workings and resources within this powerhouse of south Omaha. . . . I enjoy scanning the crowd to find a little girl the right size for a pretty Christmas dress I'm carrying, or for the fancy used snow boots, or the cast-off soft toy puppy. Their eyes light up and warm my heart.

Franklin Wood — Leader

It's hard to believe that another world could exist 20 minutes away from my home in west Omaha. The first contrast was a note on the door of the Hope Skate place. "These colors are not allowed: Blue, Red, Orange." For gangs, I guess. The eyes and hearts of the kids are the same just about anywhere you go.



Southwest Church of Christ members pack goody bags. A group from the church was one of several that participated recently in an Urban Plunge. The events are designed to bring participants from the suburbs or small towns to Omaha's inner city.

Journals show impact on helpers

During recent weekend urban plunges, participants wrote about their experiences in journals. Some of their entries:

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE MASTER

Alli Van Roekel — Leader

At the Hope Center for Kids, I saw exactly what they stand for — hope! I saw children having fun with lots of smiles on their faces. I think it's amazing that they teach social skills and things that will give them the opportunity for success in their future.

(Salem Baptist Church) is a blessed church with some great resources with which they use to praise the Lord and share the Gospel. The music was vibrant and moving! We all couldn't help but stand and dance a little as the whole church sang their hearts out to God. I'm planning to come again and bring my husband and some friends!

Stephanie Branchaud

Matthew 25:35-36. This verse is what this weekend is all about. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." This is basically what all of these ministries are doing for the people that need it.

It was amazing to hear the people at Mission For All Nations talk about what they had been through. When they had almost nothing, God provided for them and gave them money so they could keep their ministry going. It is really a great example of how you can trust in the Lord with your whole life because if you are doing His work, He will take care of you.

Samantha Bodkin

The Hope Center was an awesome place. It really was amazing to see the facilities and programs they offered children. Learning about what the Hope Center did and was all about really helped me understand the importance of after-school programs, structure and stability.

Mission For All Nations was an awesome facility and was really serving those in need. It was a great experience being able to serve the community by simply giving them a week's groceries. It was an experience I will never forget, and I will always admire those people that run missions because of the immense strength, endurance, time and courage it must take.

Kaitlin Johnson

When I started to walk up to the Hope Center, all these kids were outside hanging up Christmas lights. It was just really powerful knowing that there is a safe place where one's kid can go after school and just know that they will get tutored, have fun, learn about God and just be in a safe environment.

When our group went to the jail, I had no idea what to expect. When we talked to two of the people

there, they really opened my eyes to see that even all the wrong things you do no matter how bad, God will love, forgive and help you if you just would call upon His name.

Mark Sidwell

We went to the Omaha Correctional Facility. We got the chance to talk to two people. One was incarcerated for distribution of alcohol. I was amazed that he had found the love of Jesus. He knew he was tired of living the life he had been. He was determined to make a better life for himself. The other person had been in prison for over 18 years. She realized early in her sentence that she needed something more. She studied God's word. She is determined to be successful in her life and her faith.

SOUTHWEST CHURCH OF CHRIST

Sharon Thomsen

Wow. What do I do on a Friday night? Take home a pizza, pick up a video and veg out at the end of a busy week. What do Angels (on Wheels) do? Head down to Park Avenue to pray for lonely residents of an apartment tower for the poor. We sang Christmas carols in the halls and left bags of cookies at each door. Those who opened their doors had open faces, many being willing to share prayer requests, which we could pray with them. The Holy Spirit was definitely at work here to give people hope and to help them know God was caring for them in spite of their circumstances.

Everyone (at Empty Tomb), for the most part, obviously has led or is leading very hard lives. They wiped tears from their eyes as the words of the hymns and the prayers of the minister touched their hearts. Helping pass out the groceries after the service is one of the most meaningful things I've ever done because I knew there was no doubt in the minds of the received that it was given in Jesus' name, with His total acceptance, mercy and invitation to make a change in their lives through His power. I am coming back!

Franklin Wood — Leader

If you want to meet REAL prayer warriors who aren't afraid to get into people's lives to help, you need to meet Angels on Wheels! We met them in an apartment complex that houses low/no income folks . . . mostly elderly or those with no family, trying to get on their feet. Together with the Angels, we delivered bags of cookies and sang Christmas carols. If someone wanted to talk or needed prayer requests, a few would stay behind to chat and pray with them.

Scott Moore

I will always remember this trip downtown. I will never forget some of the people I met. I had so much fun volunteering for the homeless and near homeless. I really learned a lot.

— Compiled by Jaime Potthast