

by Janine Calsbeek

ORANGE CITY – It was a crash course in Christian service... nine ministries in one weekend.

It was Omaha Urban Plunge, but instead of a plunge, Rob Vande Lune called it "Urban Cannonball."

They jumped in, and the splash was huge. Sometimes their heads were spinning. By the final day, they were exhausted.

But, in the middle of visiting shelters for the homeless, organizing clothes at a thrift store, giving out coffee on the street, and worshipping at churches in North Omaha, these kids and adults also sat down with people who live there. They talked with each other. They prayed for each other.

It was eye-opening, said many of the group from Trinity Reformed Church. It pulled them out of their comfort zone.

"I didn't know," said Nathan Dykstra, "that there was that much need around us, homelessness that close. It's a shock."

And so many homeless people. One shelter houses 290 people, said Phyllis Van Peurseem, another houses 160. "And they have to turn away people," she said.

The contingent of 12 youth and seven adults gave out cookies and pamphlets to people who walked by. They split up and sat near strangers at mealtime at a homeless shelter. They heard stories, from Hispanics, from Caucasians, from African-Americans.

"Most of them were of a different race, and we are white. We thought they would be hesitant to speak to us. But they weren't," said Brittany Hector. It was scary but good, to talk and to listen.

It was surprising, said Ashley Schutt, "how willing they were to tell their stories." Human contact – caring contact – is welcomed and appreciated.

Some of the stories were amazing, said Ashley Wright. Interestingly, one of the Sudanese men she talked with was a Christian and trusted her and her friends, but his buddies didn't... "They thought that we, being white, were there to cause more problems."

Many of the people they met were compassionate, offering to pray for the lo-wans.

And they were generous in other ways.

At the Empty Tomb Church, at a service for the homeless community, Van Peurseem sat by someone other than her husband. She realized, too late, that Pete had money for the offering; she didn't. But the homeless lady next to her handed her a dollar, so she would have some money to give. And the woman refused reimbursement later.

"They reached into their pockets to dig out as much change as they could find for offering," said Wright, "when I didn't even bring a couple of dollars that I could have spared. These people gave all they had, and... so willingly."

Some spoke English, some didn't. Some were believers in Christ, others were not. Some were open. At one point, said Hector, the group distributed pamphlets to people on the street, pamphlets which introduced Christianity. One man actually stood under the street light and read it. Hector was surprised. Now, whenever she sees her partner in that experience, Leah DeGraaf, she remembers that man under the street light, reading the story of Christ.

The group visited ministries with after-school programs, Bible studies, and counseling services. They saw those that distribute blankets and clothing and that serve hot meals. They went roller skating with North Omaha children. They gave out bags of groceries after a church service. They heard about training programs in job skills for adults and social skills for kids.

The jail made an impression on Van Peurseem. The night before, the group handed out coffee and cookies on the street and thought about the challenges of homelessness. The next day, at Community Corrections Center, they saw that, in some ways, jail is better. Yes, prisoners are confined. But they are fed and sheltered.

The two inmates who spoke to them were anxious to be released from the minimum security facility, however. One, a father of nine, had been a drug dealer, but he had a strong desire to get out of jail and help his youngest child. The other, a woman convicted of manslaughter, regretted the life and surroundings that she had gotten involved in... and upon release, planned to live with her sister.

It was eye-opening, said Van Peurseem. They heard from a man who used to be a devil worshipper, before he became a Christian, said Van Peurseem. They met a homeless man whose fingers looked like they had been frostbitten, said Schutt. There were many "nice people, down on their luck," Van Peurseem said. "They had made bad choices."

She and the others were impressed with the ministries – offering food, giving hope, showing God's love. It was helpful too, to hear some workers' personal stories... why they've committed their lives to this service.

It was an immersion, a chance to expose students and adults to the needs, said Vande Lune, director of student ministries at Trinity.

The weekend was well-organized, and "things lined up" amazingly well, he said.

The goal is to encourage the participants to find their passions, their gifts, their interests... and use them to help others.

Vande Lune, his wife Erin, and Jon Nelson of Trinity are brainstorming some follow-up projects. So are the others who participated in Urban Plunge.

Many students' worlds revolve around good grades, getting into the right college, finding a great job that makes plenty of money, said Vande Lune. He wants to continue to push beyond that... whether they choose to be involved in missions or not. In the midst of whatever profession they decide on, he said, "how can they live kingdonly?"

Coordinator of Omaha Urban Plunge is Michael Ross of Christ for the City International. He quotes Henry Blackaby, who says, "Find out where God is working and then join Him there."

Cost for each person for the Omaha Urban Plunge is \$75. For more information contact Ross at 888-526-7551 or 402-592-8332, or e-mail mross@cfc.org.