

JUSTICE AND OUTREACH AT PLYMOUTH IN A TIME OF COVID

Plymouth's Mission Statement includes the goal of *“help(ing) make God's realm visible in the lives of people, individually and collectively.”* In a nutshell, that is what the Board of Outreach and Mission aims to do. We do it with money that comes our way from various sources. More importantly, however, we do it through the engagement of Plymouth members and friends, particularly those who make up over a dozen ministry teams who are the face of Plymouth in the community.

In March 2020, “mission as usual” came to a halt as our building was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of our ministry teams were forced to curtail their normal operations, while others were called to adapt and respond in new ways. Meetings moved from the Conference Room to Zoom Rooms and the focus, of both the board and many of our teams, became aiding and supporting programs on the front lines of response to those whose lives were being deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant loss of income.

Outreach and Mission was one of the foci of a church-wide Plymouth Gives COVID Response Appeal which began in the spring. While the Appeal was being organized, the board identified four priority organizations: *The Emergency Immigration Fund of ISAAC* (emergency mini-grants to affected households), *Neighbor to Neighbor* (rental assistance), *La Familia* (gift cards to provide cash for essential purchases), and *The Food Bank for Larimer County*.

Initial grants were made to those groups from budgeted funds. Additional allocations were made to them over the next several months as money came in from the congregation. Additionally, grants were made to the Ajo (AZ) Samaritans to support their work on the southern border and the Tse' Daa' Kaan Chapter House on the Navajo Reservation (the site of numerous Plymouth mission trips), as both were experiencing significant impact from COVID.

Perhaps the local impact of the COVID crisis can best be seen through the ministry of the **One Village One Family Ministry Team**. This team works to mentor and support a family as they navigate the path from homelessness to self-sufficiency. This year's family consisted of a single mother with five children, recently housed in a subsidized apartment north of Fort Collins. The mother had worked at a local senior care facility but she was let go due to COVID-related staff cuts. The family auto had broken down, rent and utilities payments were in arrears, and the children were out of school and trying to study from home with the help of one aged laptop. Over the course of eight months, the Team worked with the family to help them stabilize. Money allocated by O/M was supplemented with Memorial Gifts that had been directed to the OVOF Reserve Fund. Other support from Homeward Alliance, Neighbor to Neighbor and other sources, was invaluable. By year's end, the family was stable!

Another Plymouth response to COVID's devastating effect on the community came through the work of our **Immigration Team**. The Bohemian Foundation had initiated a collaboration with local restaurants and community organizations to deliver meals to impacted households several days

a week. One such organization was Fuerza Latina, which had strong connections with impacted families but no way to receive meals from a refrigerated truck on Friday afternoons. The Team was able to arrange access to Plymouth's South Lot for a couple of hours each Friday, beginning August 7. They then developed a joint Plymouth-Fuerza group to receive and deliver meals each week. The number of households and meals varies as families' circumstances change, but well over 3000 meals have been delivered as this "temporary" program is now in its eighth month.

In October, the team, in collaboration with ISAAC and PSD Family Liaisons, was able once again to host an event for Newcomer Youth, including a number of Unaccompanied Minors, some of whom are not in school due to their need to work. The North Wing of the building was made available for several weeks to make this program possible, as clothes, including winter wear, and personal items were gathered and sorted. ISAAC's Emergency Fund donated generously to support this project.

The **McBackpack Ministry Team** is part of a community-wide network of volunteers who work with the Larimer County Food Bank and PSD to provide food-insecure children (and their families) with food. Despite PSD's abrupt change to Remote Learning in March, McBackpack volunteers continued to pack and deliver thousands of food bags, using several school buildings as pick-up points.

Because of COVID and the closing of Plymouth's building, Friday morning screenings for rental assistance by the **Neighbor to Neighbor/Homelessness Prevention Team** could not continue after March 20. Since then, all N2N clients have been interviewed virtually. N2N prevented 3465 evictions in 2020, and as of February 2021, one year into the pandemic, has provided \$4.2 million in rental assistance. A second way Plymouth supports N2N and Homelessness Prevention is through the **Vigil and Sleepout Team**, co-sponsored by both O/M and Christian Formation. The team, made up of youth and youth leaders, along with a staff member of N2N, did a major reimagining of the event and raised over \$20,000 (not including matching funds and proceeds from other fundraising strategies). The Vigil became a drive-in event, complete with a rented sound system, inflatable screen and a youth-made video created for the event.

The **Faith Family Hospitality Team** hosts families experiencing homelessness from Sunday afternoon to Sunday morning several weeks a year. They were able to host at Plymouth in January, but COVID caused most participating FFH congregations, including Plymouth, to close their buildings. Fortunately, Foothills Unitarian, while "closed" itself, chose to provide their facility as a permanent site for the FFH program for the duration of the crisis. Along with volunteers from Heart of the Rockies and American Baptist, Plymouth's team was able to serve FFH families the remaining four weeks they were scheduled to host.

Early in the year, due to COVID and resulting travel restrictions, Habitat for Humanity canceled all of its international builds, including one to be led by Plymouth member Lynn Wartgow in March in Guatemala and another in Nepal, for which several Plymouth members were registered, in the summer. It is not known when travel, even to disaster-recovery builds in the U.S. will resume. Meanwhile, the **Habitat Ministry Team** continued work on the 2020 Multi-Faith Build here in Fort Collins, though the number of volunteers allowed on site was reduced. Habitat was part of the

Alternative Giving Fair in November; contributions of \$6310, along with a variety of other fundraising efforts, helped the team fulfill its 2020 pledge to Habitat, despite our not being able to host the annual summer Garage Sale.

The much-beloved annual **Alternative Giving Fair** was another part of Plymouth's life that had to be rethought due to COVID. The solution: An online AGF catalog, with payment able to be made either electronically or by check. The catalog presented seven groups with whom Plymouth works (ISAAC's Emergency Immigration Fund, Equal Exchange, Habitat for Humanity FOCO, La Cocina, Lango School in Ethiopia and Rawdat El-Zuhur School in East Jerusalem as well as La Familia, which is normally supported during the holidays through the **Giving Tree Team**). Two national groups (Church World Service and Heifer International) that work globally to alleviate hunger and poverty were also included. Members were also directed to the websites of five Community Development Support programs in order to donate or purchase crafts and other project-related items. Proceeds of over \$16,000 were received through Plymouth. These gifts will help immigrants and others in need of financial assistance in our own community, as well as farmers, artisans, and children in several schools including the two that are supported through the **World Missions Team**.

The **Ending Gun Violence Team** was in the midst of a six week Lenten Adult Forum series, "Ending Gun Violence: Going Beyond Thoughts and Prayers" when the building closed. The team took a week off to figure out which of the remaining sessions could be done via Zoom, then continued the series insofar as resource people were still available and the format could be adapted to the small screen.

The Fort Collins Interfaith Council Team continues Plymouth's decades-long connection to FCIC. This year, in response to COVID, monthly meetings were done via Zoom, and a significant series, created in collaboration with World Wisdoms Project, focused attention on racial disparities in Fort Collins as well as the roots of white supremacy and ways people of faith may choose to become involved in addressing these concerns in our community. Plymouth, through O/M support, was a Sponsor of the series.

Two ministry teams related to Outreach and Mission (**Bennett School** and **CROP Walk**) were not active this year largely due to the challenges presented by COVID.