

Minutes of the St. Thomas Aquinas Human Concerns Committee Meeting
July 19, 2011

Attendance:

Paul Chestnut, Laura Chiu, George Chippendale, Ruth Chippendale, Nancy Ng

1. Faith-Sharing/Question of the Week

2. Approval of June minutes

The June minutes were approved.

OLD BUSINESS

3. Refugee Resettlement plans

We discussed several topics with respect to the Congolese refugees.

On Saturday, June 25, four of us (Rosie, Kamal, Paul, and Nancy) visited the Congolese family for the first time. We were introduced by the Catholic Charities team, Claire Collins, Theresa Samuel, and Amber McChesney-Young.

The first two families live in an apartment in San Jose, near San Thomas Expressway and Interstate 280. The third family lives in an apartment in Santa Clara. We met all except Pascal and Vincent.

We talked about what we can do for them. The number one priority is to find another place to live. For various reasons, the landlord wants them out, but he will be patient for a while. George has volunteered to head a committee to look for an alternative. Laura and Jim will assist. The ideal would be three apartments close together. Claire Collins said that they are trying to get the house in San Jose that is now being used as a transition house for refugees.

The number two priority is jobs for the men. Currently, Emmanuel works part time at Safeway, but they do not give him enough hours, and there are no benefits. Pascal works part time at Fry's Electronics. Each is earning only \$8 per hour. We should search for connections among the parishioners who might be able to get them better jobs.

Theresa said that English tutoring for the adults is very important, as well as tutoring of the children for their schoolwork. The women especially need English lessons at home, as often as possible. They have been taking English lessons at Catholic Charities. In the long term, they need to apply for citizenship, and they must speak English well to be successful.

We need a liaison to talk to the teachers at the schools. Susan volunteered to do this. Chantel is in Middle School and Daniel and Dianna are in kindergarten. They are on vacation for the summer, but they will be starting up in the fall. Chantel will need some help in her subjects. Daniel and Dianna could probably use help with numbers and letters.

The children do not have toys or books. We have brought a few toys and many books. We will ask our parishioners for more. We should bring a few toys and books with each visit.

They need lessons on shopping know-how and budgeting. Also, kitchenware, hazardous materials, cleaning house, hygiene, etc.

We talked about nutrition. They all look healthy, except for Illuminata, who had been sick. The children all seem strong and happy. They said they could use quarters for the laundry machine, which is on site. We should consider collecting quarters and delivering a few with each visit.

They need help interfacing with doctors and dentists, and appropriate follow-up. Virginia has volunteered to do this.

Furniture is a need, but we will put this off until they move. Catholic Charities has furniture, but transportation will be required, so we will look for a parishioner with a truck who will volunteer to help with transportation of furniture from

Catholic Charities to their new abodes,

On July 12, Laura took Emmanuel, Pascal and Vincent to the Ascent Employment Program. The volunteers there helped them start their accounts with the program, polish/create their resumes, register at some job search sites etc. It was a very good start, and Pascal already submitted applications to FOUR job positions at Safeway. Turns out he was an experienced butcher back in Africa and he is hoping to get a full time job as a "meat cutter" there. This will be a big improvement from his employment with Fry's right now. They all promised to keep on going there on their own (#25 bus or bike) whenever possible to continue with the job search.

Five of us visited the refugees on July 18: Rosie, Virginia, Erika, Susan, and Paul. Seventeen-year old Erika made a big difference. She struck up a friendship with fourteen-year old Chantel. We brought toys and lots of children's books, which made a big hit. We also brought a gift from Laura: a briefcase and file folders, because last Tuesday, "when I took them to the employment program, Pascal put his papers in between the pages of a hard-back children's picture book which has pages falling out. I think he can use some sturdy file folders and project folders." Susan talked about getting them ready for school; she will be the liaison with the schools and the teachers. Virginia made good progress with medical appointments. She wrote down all the dates in the calendar. The first one is July 21.

Catholic Charities has worked with a non-profit group -- Refugee Transitions. They are providing a camp for kids ages 5 to 17 from July 18 to July 28. Chantel and Daniel will attend. Agnes and Pascal signed the application forms for the camp for Chantel and Daniel. I sent them to Elsa (the coordinator) by email. We brought a calendar and marked the dates.

The adults do not have bikes because the ones that had been provided by Catholic Charities have been stolen. Chantel and Daniel have bikes with locks. We will see about getting bikes and locks for the men. Catholic Charities provided bikes initially.

We inquired about household items. They need tableware (knives, forks, spoons) and various other kitchen implements. They are equipped with the bare necessities of pots and pans and utensils.

All of them need to improve their English. We should make that a high priority item. Also, the men especially should work on reading and writing English, in order to be better prepared for employment.

That's where we are now. We would like to ask for useful items from our generous parishioners. Here is a list:

- Tableware (knives, forks, and spoons). If you have a set you are not using, let us know.
- Kitchen utensils and gadgets.
- Toys. We have provided some. We can use some more.
- Strollers. They have none.
- Bikes and bicycle locks.
- Flash cards - word on one side, picture on the other.
- A truck to transport furniture.
- A computer to access the internet. Email is important when seeking a job.
- The big item is jobs. Does any parishioner have a way to find jobs for a well-motivated immigrant who does not speak English well?

Our volunteers are very impressive. They are jumping in and making friends, and coming up with a lot of ideas. Our job will be done when this well-motivated group of refugees, who have almost nothing, are independent, have meaningful jobs, and are on their way to becoming citizens.

We set up a Yahoo Group to facilitate communication.

6. Death Penalty issues

5. Life and Dignity Sunday report

On June 25 and 26, the congregation was asked to sign and hand in the registration postcards for the California Legislative Network (CLN). 155 cards were turned in, specifically as follows:

STA, 7:30 am – 13

8:45 am – 13

10:30 am – 12

12:00 pm - 8

SAG, 5 pm – 10

9 am - 29

OLR, 9 am – 57 (Hispanic) 10: 30 am - 13

6. St. Vincent DePaul

They need eight more drivers for the Hidden Villa camp for kids.

NEW BUSINESS

7. What's On Your Mind?

Laura discussed three proposed activities of the Green Committee to encourage ecologically sound behavior in the parish:

- 1) August will be Bike to Church month. Encouragement will be offered in the form of a sweepstakes prize drawing at the parish picnic from among those who fill out a card each time they bike to church.
- 2) Parish picnic: The Green Committee will have an information table to encourage “living green,” and perhaps sponsor some games that echo the green living theme.
- 3) St. Albert the Great art exhibit in October: The Green Committee will sponsor/encourage the submission of art/craft work made from recyclable materials.

8. Volunteer for Faith-sharing/Question of the Week

Next meeting - September 20 , 2011