

40-Day Appeal

Why Lent is becoming a second Christmas

Dennis Ehling and his wife Peggy have donated to Habitat for Humanity for more than a decade. But it wasn't until March that the couple grabbed paint brushes and volunteered on one of the pan-Christian nonprofit's home-repair days.

What finally drew the Catholic couple from the pews to a project site was the Lent Build campaign of Habitat's Los Angeles chapter. During the 40-day period before Easter known as Lent, Christians of all denominations traditionally focus on praying, fasting and serving the community. Capitalizing on that last pillar, charities that make a push for donations and volunteers during Christmas increasingly see Lent as a similar opportunity.

Executives at Habitat for Humanity, St. Vincent de Paul and Catholic Relief Services, among others, say they've experienced a tremendous boost in support as a result of special marketing campaigns during Lent the past few years. "The reality is we wanted to do this for a while,

but Lent made all the difference," Dennis Ehling said of his Habitat for Humanity experience. "If it wasn't for Lent, we wouldn't have been taking a day off. We could have kept putting it off."

Chris Untiet, Habitat L.A.'s faith-based volunteering director, copied the idea for a Lent Build from other Habitat groups. Every Wednesday through Saturday of Lent, more than 40 churches and other community groups sent a handful of volunteers to help with home-repair projects.

Peggy Ehling said the Lent Build is a good way to get churchgoers started with Habitat, but she worried about a drop-off after Easter. "Our church choir visits the senior home in December, but does anyone visit in April?" she said.

Untiet might have that covered. He wants to use other religious traditions for special projects during their annual celebrations. "We want to look into Ramadan build or Sukkot build in the future and bring other faiths in through their traditions," Untiet said. "We have

this common thing in all religions for helping out our communities."

More than 80 percent of the nation's religious congregations lead community service projects, according to a 2009 report from the Corporation for National & Community Service in Washington, D.C. The report also shows nonprofits that partner with religious groups "report greater benefits."

Since starting the Lent Build campaigns, Untiet said the number of volunteers from congregations during Lent has surged from approximately 100 or more volunteers a year to an estimated 260 volunteers a year.

Funding from church-related donors increased from an estimated \$7,500 each Lent to \$25,000. The latter figure is still less than the \$50,000 that Habitat L.A. raises from church groups during Christmas. But, \$15,000 of that is from a special Christmas campaign. Untiet said much of that springtime money was left on the table in previous years.

The Lent donation drive this year was

expected to bring in more than \$30,000 compared to \$20,000 in the campaign's inaugural year. He said other chapters have sparked donations through a 40-day devotional calendar. One day might say, "Put \$1 in the jar if your roof leaks and \$2 if it doesn't." The jar could have \$50 to \$75 ready to donate by the end of Lent.

Leaders at St. Vincent de Paul Council of Los Angeles realized two years ago that Easter had been overlooked. David Fields, the council's executive director, said there has been a "pretty nice response" when it solicited donations with a direct mail campaign just before Lent.

"People are more in a giving mood financially during Lent," Fields said. "There's a sense of wanting to do something more because of the holiday."

The website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops urges parishioners to make Lenten donations to Catholic Relief Services' Operation Rice Bowl, which fights hunger globally. Parishioners are encouraged to donate what-



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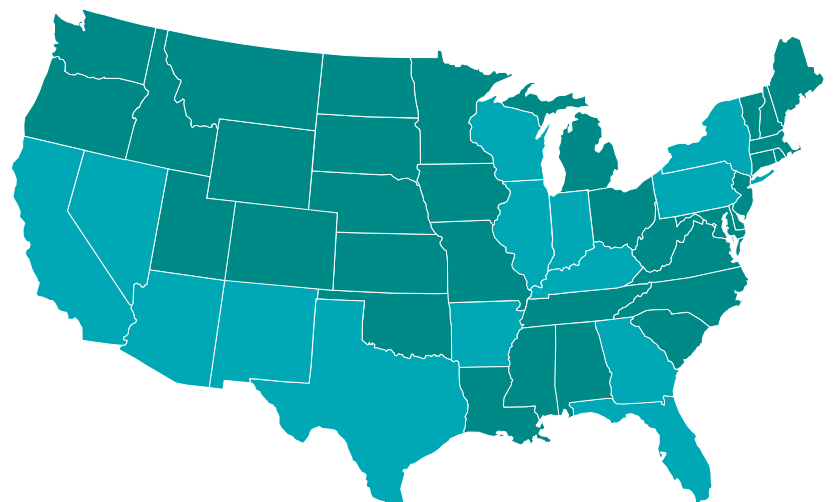
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percent of that goal, or about \$260,000.

Back at Habitat's Lent Build on a recent overcast Friday, the Ehlings and eight others paused mid-afternoon to marvel at the transformation of the house they had re-painted. Like all Habitat builds, the day had begun with an ad-lib prayer.

Stan Kaminski was glad it all worked out. Kaminski, along with Linda Nguyen, helped coordinate to have the Notre Dame Club of Los Angeles volunteer with Habitat for the first time in six years. "You go and pray in church and say all these good things," he said. "But you need to do the walk and this is a great occasion to do it." *NPT*

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ever money they saved from their 40-day sacrifice. The Lenten appeal raised \$8 million last year, according to Program Manager Beth Martin. Though that's only about 1 percent of the Catholic Relief Services' operating budget, Martin said the campaign is about more than fundraising.

"As far as engagement goes, this is the

biggest thing we do," she said. "We see it as a faith-formation tool to help people really experience Lent."

The Catholic Church is not the only faith group seeking to expand Lenten giving. The Episcopal Church decided in 2009 to make tackling malaria one of its main charitable goals. The denomination's Los Angeles diocese got creative

last year, marketing a program to deliver mosquito nets to people in Africa as "40 Days/40,000 Nets."

"It was a lofty goal, but it rolled off the tongue so we went with it," said Christian Kassoff, the diocese's coordinator for Episcopal relief and development. The diocese welcomed donations until the end of the year and reached 55

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