

Evangelism is in the Bag at Epiphany Lutheran

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Sometimes extending a warm welcome to new neighbors can yield big results.

That's been the experience for Epiphany Lutheran Church in Eagle Lake, Minn.

A new "God's work. Our hands." banner is proudly on display outside the church.

And the congregation has just started sponsoring a missionary in Chile through ELCA Global Mission.

Both projects were possible because of Epiphany's "Welcome Bags." This innovative program, launched in 2006, has raised over \$2,000 to date for the congregation's outreach and evangelism ministries.

A Partnership of Welcome

Epiphany is located in a growing bedroom community outside of Mankato, Minn. When the congregation's pastor, the Rev. Mary Iverson, noticed there was no "Welcome Wagon" service to greet the influx of new residents, she decided that Epiphany could step in to help.

So Pastor Iverson reached out to local businesses with the offer of a unique partnership. The "Welcome Bag" program was born.

Newcomers to the community are greeted with canvas bags printed with "Welcome to Eagle Lake—a service of Epiphany Lutheran Church."

The bags are filled with resources to help new residents get settled in, including free gifts from merchants and information about Epiphany and its preschool, including a brochure, magnet, notepad and pen with the congregation's contact information.



Photos courtesy LeAnne Johansen

"The bank puts in nice rain gauges, a plumber has boxes of chocolates, the dentist gives sports water bottles and a toothbrush," explains Pastor Iverson. "It's a wonderful way to introduce new residents to community services and to their local ELCA congregation."



Members of the Epiphany Evangelism and Outreach Team, from left: Will Behsman, Jerry Lamp, Regan Oian Vust, Brenda Oian Vust and Nadia Oian Vust.

Brenda's daughters regularly go with their mother as she delivers Welcome Bags in her neighborhood.

A Congregational Commitment

It's also been a wonderful way for Epiphany to raise money for its evangelism and outreach ministries.

Local businesses pay a fee to be included in the "Welcome Bag." Epiphany's Evangelism Committee assembles and addresses the bags and members of the congregation happily drop them off with new residents.

That's Pastor Iverson's favorite part of the program.

"I just love that our members are the ones who deliver them to their new neighbors. It may have been my idea, but [the implementation] has been 100 percent a program of our members. It's not pastor-driven like so many things end up being in the church!

"We've delivered 100-150 bags to new residents every year," Pastor Iverson reports. "So many visitors say that they received one of our 'Welcome Bags,' including a retired United Methodist pastor who now worships with us."

The long-term benefits of this ministry have been remarkable. More visitors on Sunday mornings. Funding for new outreach initiatives. New partnerships in the local community and in Chile.

All thanks to Epiphany's commitment to warmly welcoming the stranger.