

Corner of Hope helps curb world hunger

Foods Resource Bank programs flourish in northeast Iowa

By Joseph O'Brien
Northeastern Iowa Correspondent

WAUKON – On a typical crisp fall day in early November, a group of farmers has gathered in a ridge top cornfield between Waukon and Churchtown to harvest a ripe field of corn. A combine donated by a local farm implement dealer for the day's work rolls its header like a giant electric razor through more than 15 acres of corn, leaving stubble in its wake and stopping occasionally to unload its hopper into one of a continuous stream of grain trucks.

After bringing their grain to market, the farmers will deposit the wages for their fruit and labor into a bank – but it's no ordinary bank to help pay bills or mortgage. Rather, it's one that will help pay down world hunger.

The group of farmers in the field that day represented Corner of Hope, a Foods Resource Bank (FRB) growing project. With members of area churches participating, including St. Patrick, Waukon; Old East and West Paint Creek, Evangelical Lutheran; Zalmona United Presbyterian; and Zion United Church of Christ, Waukon, Corner of Hope has raised almost \$70,000 for various overseas agricultural programs since 2005 – \$32,000 of that being raised in this year's harvest alone.

Begun in 1999, FRB has been providing funds for agricultural programs in the developing world through the donations of farmers, businesses, and churches in the U.S. Headquartered in Chicago, FRB describes itself on its website (foodsresourcebank.org) as a "Christian non-government, humanitarian organization committed to providing food security in the developing world through sustainable small-scale agricultural production, thereby allowing hungry people to know the dignity of feeding themselves."

Banking resources

According to Joan Fumetti, a member of FRB's Midwestern regional field staff in Dubuque, there are 52 programs like Corner of Hope running in the Midwest.

With 15 member organizations – including Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Lutheran World Relief and Church World Services, Fumetti said, FRB is a grassroots operation with little overhead, allowing for a more efficient management of funds. After FRB receiving profits from community growing projects, the bank holds the money until the growing project directs the funds to a specific member organization.

"FRB is not recreating any services that are already out there," she said. "For example, if you're Catholic, you're already paying for CRS to exist. So FRB simply encourages groups to do a mission through CRS or other member organizations."



Joe and Jerry Sweeney, members of St. Patrick Parish, Waukon, rent out their farm-land and donated this parcel near Churchtown, to the Corner of Hope Project. Farmers involved in the project took turns helping with the harvest. (Photos by Joseph O'Brien)

Each FRB group – such as Corner of Hope and its sister project in Winneshiek County, Community of Hope – decides for itself which charitable groups to send their funds to, Fumetti said.

"Once a group's raised the money, it can decide where it wants the money to go – like a bank with different accounts," she said.

"Each (overseas) program is designed to last three to five years," she explained, noting that the donations often fund a gamut of agricultural training programs – including agricultural economics, basic agricultural skills, and water and soil improvement programs.

Community of faith

According to project chair John Prestemon, Corner of Hope has the double benefit of being both a faith-based and community-based project.

"We've found it one of the most exciting and charitable ventures we've been in and a pretty remarkable success," he said.

A member of Zion United Church of Christ, Waukon, Prestemon also points to the cooperation among different churches as an attractive part of the work.

"It's been such a wonderful ecumenical experience," he said, explaining that every

monthly meeting has at least 15 to 20 people showing up from Catholic, Lutheran, United Church of Christ and the other participating churches. "Everyone's excited about the project, everyone's enthused – so we don't have to twist arms to get things done – the whole group is willing to do their part, which makes it go that way without a lot of effort."

A parishioner at St. Mary's, Hanover, with a 200-acre farm in the Hanover area, Dennis Byrnes has been working with Corner of Hope since 2006. Each year, he said, he has donated some of his own land to the project.

"It so happened I rented a farm from my neighbor and told (the Corner of Hope organizers) I would give them seven acres they could have (for the project)," he explained.

Altogether, he said, Corner of Hope harvests close to 50 acres for world hunger. With seven children and 19 grandchildren, Byrnes sees Corner of Hope as his response to an issue which hits home – world hunger.

"When my grandchildren visit and they're hungry, you feed them," he said. "So you see the satisfaction on their faces. These children are no different from children in Saudi Arabia or Guatemala, or

anywhere else in the world. I think it's just terrible that a young child goes without food. This was the driving factor for me in joining Corner of Hope."

City people can help

The director of the Office of Rural Life & Community Development for the Archdiocese, Mary Klauke, noted that the program is a natural fit with the rural character of the archdiocese.

"FRB is the most logical way for those of us who live on some of the best food producing ground in the world to share the fruits of the land God gives us with those around the world with much less productive land," she said. "It links us directly to the work of CRS and other faith groups in war-torn and poverty-stricken lands around the world."

Not an opportunity for farmers only, Klauke noted that everyone in the archdiocese can become involved in FRB.

"Business people and city folk can donate inputs – seed, fertilizer, fuel and hauling supplies, for instance," she explained. "In learning about the importance of sustainable local food systems for the people in developing lands, we begin to see that local sustainable food systems are important to our communities, too, especially in terms of ensuring access to safe, quality food and in maintaining our own local economy."

Word spreads

A parishioner at St. Benedict's, Decorah, Julie Vulk, was so inspired by what she saw at Corner of Hope, that she helped start a similar project in Winneshiek County.

Community of Hope raised \$18,000 in its first year and although the group was still tallying this year's harvest income, according to Vulk, they hope to do as well if not better this year.

"It has just been the most rewarding project to work on," Vulk said. "It's especially rewarding when you're working with farmers on a day-to-day basis and watch what they do best – grow food – and to know that 100 percent of their profit is used for underdeveloped countries. Typically you only hear about these kinds of projects sending 80 to 90 percent, but with FRB it's 100 percent going to the people that need it."

After spending some time learning about FRB with Corner of Hope, Don Elsbend, also of St. Benedict's, Decorah, helped form Community of Hope.

The FRB program was a perfect fit for him and he liked the idea of helping out the global fight against hunger on a local level.

"I like the ability to help people elsewhere in the world who are less fortunate to become more self-sustainable in their lives," he said. "I also like the ability to work on something like this which is a community-building effort for people on a local level, too."

"FRB is the most logical way for those of us who live on some of the best food producing ground in the world to share the fruits of the land God gives us with those around the world with much less productive land."

Mary Klauke



Dave Prestemon, a member of the Corner of Hope project came to help with the harvesting of the 15 plus acres of corn between Waukon and Churchtown.



Project chair John Prestemon, a member of Zion United Church of Christ, Waukon, loves the ecumenical cooperation that results from the Corner of Hope project. "We've found it one of the most exciting and charitable ventures we've been in and a pretty remarkable success," he said.



Checking out the quality of the corn during a break is Larry Stratte. Since 2005, farmers in the area have raised \$70,000 for the Foods Resource Bank.



More online at
www.foodsresourcebank.org



The individual kernels of corn harvested in Allamakee and Winneshiek counties are like golden coins that help farmers in poor parts of the world improve their agricultural practices so they can feed their families and have better crops to sell.