

1981-1982

THE HISTORY OF GRATE PATROL

THE FIRST IN A SERIES

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THE BEGINNING OF GRATE PATROL

This article is the first in an occasional series.

The Hunger Committee's Grate Patrol has been a pillar of Saint Paul's outreach and is recognized throughout the Diocese for its commitment to feed the hungry and to bring diverse people together. The Hunger Committee has existed for thirty years and the Grate Patrol has been in continuous operation for approximately 26 years.

Every Saturday and Sunday morning, volunteers meet in the parking lot at 5:30, load supplies into cars and then follow well-established routes through Foggy Bottom, Georgetown and downtown areas of the city, delivering 200 simple breakfasts to the homeless people sleeping on heating grates (hence the name "Grate Patrol"), park benches, garages, etc. Each person is offered a cup of coffee and paper bag containing a sandwich, hardboiled egg, banana and coffee condiments. Also placed in each bag is a small "prayer slip" on which is printed a greeting, short Bible verse and the name and address of Saint Paul's.

In its current weekend morning form, our Grate Patrol is designed to complement a larger, more formal program called "Miriam's Kitchen", based at Western Presbyterian Church on 24th Street. At Miriam's a hot, sit-down breakfast is served Monday through Friday, but is closed on Saturday and Sunday.

How did the Grate Patrol start? How has the role of Saint Paul's

Hunger Committee evolved from a small group of parishioners going out to serve in other places around the city, to a long-established (and perhaps taken for granted) parish program that other groups send *their* volunteers to? This brief account attempts to address these questions, with an emphasis on ten pivotal months from November 1981 through August 1982.

The Hunger Committee was formed in 1978 and at first focused its efforts on assisting two other, more well-established city programs. Volunteers from the parish bought, prepared and served breakfast one Saturday a month at So Others May Eat (a large community outreach organization located off North Capitol Street), and one Saturday supper at the House of Ruth (a small shelter for homeless and/or battered women).

The first Grate Patrol was made on Wednesday evening, 7 January 1981, by a member of the Hunger Committee acting on his own. Away from the DC area during Christmas-tide, he had read in a Pennsylvania newspaper of the deaths of two men living on Washington's steam grates and was moved by a desire to do something for the homeless. So, on that night after the Epiphany, he made bologna sandwiches, heated beef soup and took this food to people he saw on grates along Virginia Avenue between the Interior and State Departments. He continued taking food out the following nights and told a few other Hunger Committee

members what was taking place. Quickly four or five members began to help, and they all took turns on this initial, impromptu Grate Patrol every night for 2 ½ months, concluding on 21 March. One of the participants was Saint Paul's energetic and popular curate, the Reverend Father Robert F. Waggener.

In the spring and summers of 1981 the Hunger Committee continued its usual monthly commitments to So Other May Eat (S.O.M.E.) and the House of Ruth. Then in the autumn Father Waggener and the leaders of the Committee laid the groundwork for the months ahead with bulletin announcements of a meeting scheduled for Monday, 23 November, inviting interested parishioners to examine new opportunities for helping the homeless in the coming cold months. (It must be remembered that at the time-late 1981-there was as yet no Miriam's Kitchen, no Georgetown Ministry Center, no Salvation Army

Grate Patrol and no Fannie Mae Help for the Homeless Walkathon. All these now-familiar programs lay in the future.) The day before the meeting was Christ the King Sunday, and Father Waggener galvanized the parish by a powerful sermon based on the Gospel from Matthew 25, "Lord, when did we see Thee hungry?" The bulletin announcements and the sermon resulted in a well-attended and enthusiastic meeting which launched us into ten months containing three different projects, each one more intense and demanding than the other; each one attracting more and more volunteers from the parish.

The immediate result of the 23 November meeting was the establishment of the Grate Patrol as a formal, recognized element of the Hunger Committee. With sixteen parishioners each committing themselves for service one night a week and several others acting as substitutes, the Committee began a well-staffed patrol in

early December that lasted about three months, bringing hot soup or stew to people on the Virginia Avenue grates. At the same time two parishioners who faithfully attended the daily 7:00am Mass started a morning patrol. Every day throughout the winter before coming to Mass, they took breakfasts of tea, bread and fruit to people of the street.

While the Grate Patrol had been expected and somewhat planned for in advance, the next project which presented itself was surprising and spontaneous – a shelter for homeless men in the dining hall. Father Waggener had been scheduled for a pre-Lent vacation, and after the Solemn Mass on The First Sunday after the Epiphany, 10 January 1982, he and his young family departed in their VW van to visit relatives in the Midwest. On that bitterly cold afternoon the heater inside the van didn't work, and the thought occurred to him that, if he and his family were this cold and uncomfortable inside their own vehicle, how much more cold and uncomfortable the homeless must be. So, turning around at Winchester, Va., and coming back to Washington, they stopped at the grates, picked up those homeless who were willing and brought them all back to their own apartment above the church office, where they spent the night. The operation was transferred the next night to the dining hall where it ran until the end of January. Between 15 and 19 guests were given a hot meal each evening, an endless supply of coffee, sleeping pads and blankets, and breakfast in the mornings. They were treated to showers in the Waggeners' apartment and had their clothes cleaned in the parish washer

Volunteers packing breakfasts for Grate Patrol in 2008



and dryer. The parish rallied around this effort- some people furnished the meals, others blankets and clothing and still others volunteered to stay throughout the night in the dining hall with the guests. The shelter closed at the end of the month as the spell of extremely cold weather broke, and the approach of Lent brought added responsibilities to the priests and previously scheduled activities to the Pillsbury House.

With the conclusion of the Grate Patrols in middle of March, the Hunger Committee moved on to its third and, as it turned out, most ambitious project yet. Inspired by programs run by religious communities in other cities, Father Waggener proposed a sandwich distribution each evening on the patio, from the front door of Pillsbury House. During the cold weather we had taken food out to those trying to stay warm on the grates, but now as the weather turned mild and the homeless left the grates, they could come to us. There was little advance publicity and on the first evening, Friday 26 March, only five people came to the Pillsbury House front door for food. But word on the streets soon spread, and by 11 April (Easter Sunday) we were serving around 25 people each night; by 30 May (Whitsunday) around 50; by the end of June 80-90; by the middle of July 110; and on Sunday 1 August we recorded the highest total of all, 160 people served. By the time it came to a halt, on Monday 23 August, our program had provided around 9,800 evening meals!

The constantly growing size over these five months gave us both blessings and headaches. The blessings included yet more parishioners vol-

unteering their services and/or supporting the Hunger Committee with their financial contributions. (Indeed, between the Grate Patrols, meal preparations at S.O.M.E. and House of Ruth, the January shelter and the sandwich distribution on the patio, there were probably 60-70 individuals, almost all members of Saint Paul's, who participated). among the headaches were acquiring and preparing the food (we started in March with sandwiches and moved on to boiling massive quantities of hot dogs and mixing gallons of instant iced tea); crowd control, trash and resulting complaints from the neighborhood; and considerable inconvenience for those coming to church to worship (imagine coming to Evensong and Benediction at 6:00 o'clock on Sunday and finding dozens of people having a meal on the patio, lawn and sidewalk along K Street!) The challenge for our reliable, dedicated volunteers each evening of preparing and serving the large amount of food and handling the crowd- especially its more boisterous, aggressive members - brought the danger of volunteer burnout.

By the middle of summer it was clear that the patio food distribution could not continue indefinitely, and at a large Hunger Committee meeting one July Sunday after Mass, a six-person planning committee was formed to help point out the road ahead. We'd learn a lot over the past nine months - how many homeless there were who could benefit from our services; how strongly the parish backed the Hunger Committee's endeavors (especially important was the support we received from the rector, Father Daughtry); and yet how diffi-

cult it all actually had been for our volunteers. The work never got smaller or came to a conclusion. Instead it got larger and more complex, with no end in sight. It was exactly as Our Lord had said—the poor would be with us always. Perhaps we need to look beyond our own resources at Saint Paul's and enlist the help of others?

At a subsequent meeting on the afternoon of Sunday 22 August, the Hunger Committee decided to end the patio food distribution the following night. While this gave most of our volunteers a much needed break, the planning committee continued its work for the coming cold weather. They contacted other Episcopal churches and charitable organizations with a view to establishing a coordinated effort, one that could draw from a larger base of volunteers and financial support and also be able to serve more homeless on more grates than our own Patrols had done the previous winter.

The planning Committee's hard work reaching out to other groups lead to a great achievement - the establishment in the autumn of 1982 of the "Northwest Christian Hunger Ministry" - which we now know today as the Salvation Army Grate Patrol.

Michael Kekker is a former parishioner and parish administrator, who was essential to the foundation of Grate Patrol.

