

The Phenomenal Famine Experience

'Phenomenal' is a GREAT adjective to use to describe the event which occurred February 22 – 23 at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Neenah! During this weekend we had over 35 youth and adults CHOOSE to go for 30 hours without food. I like to joke that it is exceptional to have youth go 30 MINUTES without eating, much less 30 HOURS!

For over 10 years now we have partnered with an organization called World Vision to participate in the 30-Hour Famine. This is an event designed to raise funds and awareness to fight against the atrocity of world hunger. Participants engage in a juice and water fast – meaning they only take in water or 100% fruit juice during the fasting time. Students began their fast after lunch at school on Famine Friday then Friday evening we gathered together at the church to spend the rest of the event as a large group. We traditionally go on a scavenger hunt every year to gather items to assist food pantries and homeless shelters. This year our group gathered hundreds and hundreds of canned goods, bath and hygiene items and cleaning supplies!!! These items will be donated to the Help for the Homeless program sponsored by WEMI which will benefit over 33 homeless shelters in the Fox Valley area! Back at the church we then engaged in a number of large group games designed to help us understand what it might be like to live in an area where hunger and poverty are a common problem. During these games we divided into "tribes" and each person got a new identity. With this identity the participants were also given some sort of disability that would be common for persons suffering from poverty and hunger/hunger-related diseases. Each player had to then stay in character and do the games with whatever disability they were assigned. Some were blind, others had a simulation of fever or fatigue, some were unable to use an arm or leg, etc. One game we played this year simulated traveling a long distance to obtain water for your family. This water was muddied (using sand) and also dirtied (by washing our feet in the water supply) to show that this is often the best water available for many people living in these conditions. They then had to carry their container of water (in their disabled state) back to their tribal family. In the end after several hands and feet had been in and out of the water supply and the dirt/sand was quite stirred up, I held up a clear container showing the type of water that then is brought back to the family to use for cooking, drinking, cleaning and bathing. The reality of it hit home when I challenged the youth if anyone was brave enough to try a sip! (I actually had 2 students that rose to the occasion, and as of this writing they were still showing no ill-effects from the experience – thank goodness!) After a couple of hours of playing simulation games we then closed with an evening devotion and let the students break off to play video games or other types of large group games (like Sardines) until the mandatory rest time. (Yes, it is amazing that even when they are being starved and sleep-deprived these kids can just KEEP ON GOING and you truly have to force them to rest!)

On Saturday we started the day with a morning devotion and then were onto our community service projects for the day. Our projects included serving fresh fruit to the guests of Community Table (a program run out of St. Paul every Tuesday and Saturday that serves hot meals to those unable to secure proper nutrition for themselves), making care packages and thank you cards to deliver to people that serve in our community (like

firemen, policemen, postal workers, librarians, etc.), and care packages to take to some of our homebound members and persons in care facilities. After our cards and care packages were completed we then went out into the community to deliver them! What fun it was to surprise people with a random act of kindness! My group was able to visit people in a nursing home that do not typically get visitors. It was an especially moving experience – lots of tears and smiles for sure!

After a busy day of activities in the community and re-grouping games at the church we broke our fast on Saturday night by holding a communion worship service. We then celebrated the success of our famine by eating a pot luck dinner with our families immediately afterward.

When asked what was the most meaningful part of the experience, most of our youth usually will say learning how much they take their access to food for granted – that several times during their 30 hours they would find themselves absentmindedly reaching for something from a cupboard to pop in their mouths. They are also shocked to learn some of the basic facts about world hunger ... like a child dies every 2 to 3 seconds from a hunger-related problem and that it only costs \$1/day to provide proper nutrition and safe water for a child! Mostly, however, they learned that they can take the little bit they feel they have in life and use it to be part of the solution to a massive problem! The time together is designed to show them “little miracles” all during the 30-hours. Like collecting hundreds of items to help those in need in our community, bringing a smile to the face of someone who has no family to visit them, and successfully going for 30 hours without food to raise money and awareness to fight against world hunger!!!! It is much like the gospel story of the loaves and the fishes. The disciples at first wanted to turn away from the problem of feeding the hungry crowds. But Jesus challenged them to use what they had and to believe that they **COULD** make a difference – and indeed they did, and indeed all were satisfied. So it can be with the problem of world hunger --- **AND** any problem we face. If we simply do not turn away and trust God to use what He has given us – He can work miracles through us!

[As a side note – a preliminary count shows the youth of St. Paul raised close to \$2,000 during the 30-hour Famine 2008!]