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Priest raises \$900,000 to fight hunger in Lawrence

The Boston Globe

By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | September 22, 2005

A Catholic priest in one of the poorest parishes in the region has succeeded in raising \$900,000 through the sale of edgy T-shirts and one-on-one fund-raising as his parish endeavors to construct and operate a 365-day-a-year meal center to feed the hungry in Lawrence.

Aided by comedian Conan O'Brien and Cincinnati Reds first baseman Sean Casey, the Rev. Paul B. O'Brien, pastor of St. Patrick Church in Lawrence, and his parish have raised nearly \$450,000 through T-shirt sales and another \$450,000 from foundations and major donors, all toward the construction of the Cor Unum meal center in South Lawrence.

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"We've got a galaxy of social ills in Lawrence, and in that galaxy, at the heart of a lot of issues, is the reality of hunger," O'Brien said. "If you take the economic poverty people experience and add in an extraordinarily expensive housing market, it leaves many folks with harrowing choices."

Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley, who has said that caring for the poor is his top priority as a Franciscan Capuchin friar, plans to pledge today at a news conference in Lawrence to pick up the remaining costs, estimated at \$500,000, from the sale of closing parishes. The step marks the first major expenditure of funds from parish closings on a new endeavor.

"We have always said that some portion of the reconfiguration funds are to be used by parishes and for the greater good of the archdiocese," said O'Malley's spokesman, Terrence C. Donilon. "I cannot think of any better program than feeding hungry children and families."

O'Brien's parish, which already feeds hundreds of people through a food pantry, aims to build the 5,600-square-foot meal center on a parish parking lot by spring and is raising money to operate the facility, which would serve up to 750 hot meals a day. The construction is expected to cost about \$1.4 million, and the center is hoping to operate on \$200,000 a year.

O'Brien said that 1 in 5 families in Lawrence lives in poverty and that 3 in 4 children are at risk of hunger. He said that there are several successful antihunger programs in Lawrence, including two meal centers, but that both are in North Lawrence, on the other side of the

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Merrimack River from St. Patrick's. Lawrence, once dominated by textile mills, is a struggling city that has long been populated by immigrants, in recent years from the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The effort to construct a meal center, conceived by the parish, is being funded in part through a website, labelsareforjars.org, which sells T-shirts in mason jars that can be used to collect donations. The fund-raising campaign is being led by a group of O'Brien's friends, including Conan O'Brien, who was his housemate at Harvard but is not a relative. The T-shirts carry pejorative labels on the front, like addict or homeless, and on the back simply have the website address. They are being sold at Newbury Comics, as well as by students at area colleges and high schools.

"It turns out that people really do want to feed the hungry, but the connection between people with financial resources and the hungry does not exist the way it should," the Rev. O'Brien said. "This shows that teenagers and college students and young professionals can do something totally new and genuinely unique to shake up the world for the poorest of the poor."

He said the meal center will serve anyone, but that it is Catholic in character and reflects the church's social teaching.

"It started with a group of people in a Catholic parish saying we have to provide food to anyone who is hungry here all the time," he said. "That is quite Catholic."

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