

Bethany Ministries



By Frank Fanelli

Photos by Bro. Octavio Duran, OFM

Over the three-year period doing missions with Ministry of the Word, or MOW, Father Peter Chepaitis, OFM, came to realize he was being called to a balance of contemplative prayer and more collaboration with lay women and men in the proclamation of God's Word.

This call firmed up when he took a sabbatical in 1995 from January to June. When he returned, Bethany Ministries was

in the process of being founded.

The friars and some lay people and religious who were partners in ministry with the friars in the MOW had been meeting at that time to discuss and rediscover their roles and presentation. This group was called the "Refounding Core Team." Among them was Sr. Anna Tantsits IHM, from the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters in Scranton, Pa.

As this group met, Fr. Peter

and Sr. Anna realized they shared the same dream and approach to collaboration in proclaiming the Word of God and to achieving a balance between contemplation and action. She realized that it would be difficult for her to do this alone because most Catholic parishes would expect a priest to celebrate the sacraments during the mission. Fr. Peter realized that he needed a partner in ministry with whom he could collaborate, discern and pray.

Those meetings and the prayer of Sr. Anna and Fr. Peter sowed and watered the seeds of Bethany Ministries. When Fr. Peter approached then Provincial Father Anthony Carrozzo, OFM, Fr. Anthony suggested that the Prayer House Community could nurture and sustain the contemplative aspect of Bethany Ministries and also provide a structure of accountability.

This ecumenical community of Catholics and Protestants had established a hermitage in Dingmans Ferry, Pa. in 1990. Both Fr. Peter and Sr. Anna were members of the Prayer House Community from the time of its foundation.

The group was truly ecumenical its members represented a variety of Christian denominations: Methodist, Episcopalian, Mennonite, United Church of Christ and Roman Catholic. As

Bethany Ministries evolved, it became clearer and explicit that those who were part of it were following the Rule for Hermitages established by St. Francis.

This one page document cites the example of Martha and Mary, who, with their brother Lazarus, were close friends of Jesus. Since they lived in Bethany, it became a natural choice as the title for this budding ministry.

Middleburgh, N.Y. seemed a good choice for this ministry. Fr. Peter was already familiar with the area. He had visited Kim and Reggie Harris, who had a home in Middleburgh, while he was at Saint Bonaventure. He had already done a parish mission there and in nearby Schoharie, NY, and he grew up not too far away in Hudson, N.Y.

The icing on the cake was the beautiful rural area, a natural setting for contemplative prayer. From 1996-2000, Sr. Anna was serving as Associate Director of Adult Faith Formation and Evangelization for the Albany Diocese and lived in the area. She became an integral part of the team from the beginning. Note the plural in the title: Ministries, not Ministry.

When the purpose of Bethany Ministries was finalized, it settled on three avenues, each a ministry in itself. First was proclaiming the Word of God as part of the MOW. Secondly, it

Collaborative ministry (facing page) Fr. Peter Chepaitis, OFM, and Sr. Anna Tantsits, IHM, pray together with the congregation at the Church of St. Joan of Arc, Albany N.Y.



was a ministry of prayer, and finally it was a ministry of hospitality. Those who sought to spend time in prayer would be welcomed to the small doublewide trailer hermitage which was the home base for the ministry and Fr. Peter's residence.

In the 20 years since it was founded the residences of Fr. Peter and Sr. Anna survived floods, storms, loss of almost everything and a number of other calamities. At one point, it even seemed that Bethany Ministries was about to end.

All of this could be a story in itself but what is more important is what it has become, clusters of ministry in a variety of services. It's also a web of relationships and a network of independent households.

Mission in Action Sr. Anna Tantsits, IHM, (above) joins the congregation in song at St. Joan of Arc Church, in the Albany diocese. Fr. Peter Chepaitis, OFM, (facing page) uses a puppet to illustrate a point in his homily.

In the beginning Sr. Anna worked only part time giving parish missions and retreats, when she could take time from her work in the Albany diocese. Bethany Ministries was a self-sustaining work and they were not sure it could sustain two full-time salaries.

As time went on, the preaching ministry grew. They received invitations from a number of sources, chiefly parishes within the Albany Diocese, the various apostolates of the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters, and parishes and retreat centers recommended by the MOW of Holy Name Province as well as pastors and people in the places they gave missions.

Soon the invitations grew. Sr. Anna came on full time in 2000

and they found themselves travelling from Maine to Mississippi, north to Canada, and west to California. A brief overview of a typical mission went like this. Following the MOW template the team added their unique talents to the mix. At times Fr. Peter would play the violin and Sr. Anna would sing.

They also added another novel technique. On the first day they would introduce the toad puppet "because God loves me warts and all." Drawing on her 20 years as a first grade teacher Sr. Anna would make a point of including young and old kids letting them hold or display the puppets.

Day two about mercy would bring out the skunk puppet: "Jesus forgives me even when my sins stink!" Day three, about healing, found the eagle showing up to say that "You can rise above your sin, your hurt, your sorrow."



Photo Courtesy of Bethany Ministries



Ready to proclaim the Good News Fr. Peter Chepaitis, OFM, lifts the book of Gospel before proclaiming the Word of God.

Oh, and the fourth day? That's the bear. He comes out of hibernation to spread the Word of God.

While they averaged about 6 missions and 6 retreats a year, the in-between time was anything but biding time until the next trip. There was prayer to be prayed and contemplation. From the beginning, they helped in the parishes of the Albany Diocese.

Some parishes in the area experienced the sudden loss of pastors from unexpected deaths or scandal and they would step in to help with the healing process over the stretch of time needed.

As they were recognized more and more by the local community, they engaged in a "ministry of presence," reaching out to people who might have fallen into the cracks or who were in need of food or referral to agencies which could supply their needs, or who needed moral support at the criminal trial of a family member.

Fr. Peter and Sr. Anna also participated in local civic events, such as the installation of their representative to the NY State Legislature, by playing the violin, singing and speaking. Their talent was especially welcome when Middleburgh experienced a catastrophic flood after Hurricane Irene, followed a week later by Tropical Storm Lee. The floods occurred in late August and early September 2011. Lo-

cal residents asked them to play and sing Christmas carols at a special event in December in Middleburgh, celebrating the hope and work of recovery. They even composed and sang a new verse of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" just for the town. They are asked to repeat it every year at the December event, which is called, "Miracle on Main St."

An important aspect of Bethany Ministries is ecumenical sharing. Every month Fr. Peter and Sr. Anna meet with the Catholic and Protestant clergy of the village. Those meetings have resulted in regular invitations to preach at various churches, conduct ecumenical prayer services and participate in HS Baccalaureates.

They have preached retreats for Protestant groups and have even led Parish Missions for as many as ten different congregations in the same village. As you can see, Bethany Ministries is an evolving network of relationships and ministries. As a new need presents itself, it is incorporated into the network.

Fr. Peter and Sr. Anna continue to maintain a strong connection with their religious congregations. Both of them live "singly" in the sense that they are not living with other friars or sisters. Fr. Peter joins with the "Emmaus Fraternity", composed of several other friars of HNP who live singly, every 6-8 weeks for a day of sharing of faith, friendship and food.

He also enjoys the fraternity of the friars at Siena College when he can and attends Provincial Fraternal Days and Chapters.

Sr. Anna connects with her congregations through her "mission group" several times a year and attends her congregation's chapter and several continuing education events. Sometimes Fr. Peter joins her to tend to his theological and spiritual growth

Fr. Peter says he will continue this multi-faceted work as long as his mind and body allow. He quoted the words of St. Francis to the brothers which he takes as his marching orders: "I have done what was mine to do: May Christ now teach you what is yours." His take on that saying is not to mimic what St. Francis did but to do what is his with as much passion and integrity as St. Francis.

When asked how he would like to be remembered, Fr. Peter said: "As someone who was and is a channel of healing, peace, and hope. As someone who sang a joyful song and played a joyful melody to bring hope to people."

Knowing from all his experiences and ministries, Fr. Peter has shown just as St. Francis suggested. He has gone into the world two by two, has announced peace and repentance, has suffered patiently—and grown—through the tribulation of calamity, and is continually discovering God's purpose for him. ■