

## **SOS-2020: A brief history of this outreach**

After listening to an interview on NPR in 2014, on how socks were the least donated and most needed item given to people experiencing homelessness, I approached our Rector at the time, Mother Suzanne Wiley on the possibility of simply collecting socks from the congregation for Wheeler Mission. With thought and consideration, Mother Suzanne agreed and felt this could be a good fit for All Saints with our known history of outreach in the community and the great tie in for Advent, which was soon approaching.

If memory serves me correctly, in 2014 we gathered approximately 350 pairs of socks. Then in 2015, we had a challenge from "Secret Santa" -if we could make it to 500 pair, Santa would match that number in sock donations. Our total that year was 1,728, and our quote was, "[O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!](#)" (Isaiah 2:5).

As Advent approached in 2016 we set out with an aggressive goal of 3,000 pairs of socks and a new idea of making available the sponsorship of a case of socks for 55-bucks. Each case of socks contained 120 pairs of new socks, and this time, Secret Santa would pay for the shipping of all case ordered socks. Guess what, yes, we more than doubled our goal with a total of 6,270 pairs of socks. Afterwards I wrote, "We as a congregation did this together and pray that those who receive this important, but simple gift--a pair of socks--remain safe, warm, and dry this year. Thank you to everyone for making this happen."

There were many things going on in the parish during 2017, including a major infrastructure project which would change the fabric of the building, HVAC. A decision was to simply not have a goal, but to make available the opportunities of last year's collection including the case buys which remained at \$55. Up to now, All Saints had already collected well over 13,000 pairs of socks over the past 4-years. Because of no goal in 2017, a lofty goal was determined to collaborate together in groups, inside and outside of All Saints to make the 2018 goal 10,000 pair. Hashtags of #ThankYouEveryone #WhoIsWithMe? #AllSaintsSockDrive2018HasBegun -were started on social media.

2018 approaches with a determined goal of 10,000 pair which had been set the year prior. Deacon, Cathy Scott from Holy Family Episcopal Church had seen our social media blast and involved their youth group to participate. We had All Saints parishioners who had sock parties in their own homes to aid in collection for the drive. Including Secret Santa, case buys, and article in the Episcopal Newsletter, and with everyone in celebration we collected 20,732 pairs of socks! It took 10 vehicles to transport all the socks from All Saints to Wheeler Mission that 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent.

January of 2019 in a letter thanking the parish for their efforts, Steve Kerr, Wheeler Chief Development Office wrote, "although I can't quantify it, I would bet the ranch that this is the single largest sock donation in the 125-year history of Wheeler Mission".

Early fall of 2019 I was introduced to the O'Nealya Gronstal, Director of Community Engagement for Wheeler. I learned at our current contribution of 20,000 pairs of socks we meet the demand for our community, and that Wheeler distributes our socks not only inside their facility, but throughout central Indiana including our own Day Spring and Trinity Haven. Equally intriguing, I learned Wheeler provided 253,717 nights of shelter with fresh showers in 2018.

With this information and knowledge, the All Saints Sock Drive decided to include soap to the collection in 2019, as well as, personally distributing the socks to the community through Circle City Relief. Thus, this was the first year for SOS, "Socks and Soap", as well as, the first year for "Socks on the Street". We also initiated a separate and personalized logo design just for the campaign this year. An ambitious goal of 20,000 pair of socks and 20,000 bars of soap was set. Case buys for both socks and soap were announced. A case of socks were 120 pair and a case of soap included 500 bars of personal use soap. #SOS had begun with full fanfare and all the social media we could push out behind us.

“Socks on the Street” -during the four weeks of Advent, collected socks were balled up and a personal -one sentence, note was placed inside by parishioners including the Sunday School. People experiencing homelessness are often not seen by the public and we wanted to make sure those receiving the socks knew they were seen, and they were loved. These balled up socks were taken to Circle City Relief, a program that distributes food on Sunday afternoons close to 30<sup>th</sup> and Meridian. Multiple parishioners each week passed out socks and greeted those in line for assistance.

SOS for 2019 was extremely rewarding, not only because we surpassed our individual sock and soap goals, but because of the way we came together to meet an enormous challenge once again.

2020, COVID-19, what do we do? Should we not have the SOS drive? How will we possibly collect the socks and soap when we are not even certain if we will be able to be in the church building from one week to the next? Well, what is the saying... If there is a will, there is a way?

We went full tilt with a social media campaign and reminders weekly during services that SOS was alive and well. We did decide no goals were to be set, but as in past years, to simply make available the opportunity to participate. This also meant we would be going pretty much virtual with the campaign.

Conversations with Wheeler that we were proceeding with this year’s drive yielded fruitful and they requested we concentrate on soap over socks, as our past sock drive were catching on and they were receiving socks from all over. Word had spread of “sock drives” and All Saints contributed to that happening.

Holy Family contributed once more, and Cathy Scott literally went to her parishioner’s homes to pick up socks as she visited them. Trinity Episcopal tagged on with our sock order to buy socks for their own sock distribution. Finally, a cut off was determined for 2020 and totals to be finalized, because even after Advent, the donations continued. On January 14<sup>th</sup> the last shipment of socks arrived and were distributed.

This made the grand total a whopping 83,330 pieces of either socks or soap that were donated for SOS-2020... Simply amazing!

Weeks prior totals were asked for the Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> newsletter and what was thought to be a personal note was printed. This was also after Mother Suzanne had given a homily on “In a year of bad, what was good” which resonated with me. And I wrote in that returned email. “There was a time a couple weeks ago when I looked at what had already been donated and given away this year—money, socks, soap. I paused. Then realized, I had a tear in my eye.” Who would have ever thought in a year of a pandemic, a year with limited touch, limited contact with friends and family, the SOS-2020 drive would accomplish such a feat?

SOS for 2021 - a year without a rector to champion us on, another year in a pandemic that was growing again, and while back in church, still with limited interaction. This leads us with a question of, do we proceed with another drive this year? Well, certainly we do, and SOS 2021 was under way again staying strong with the use of technology.

We had the history of our SOS outreach behind us, the weekly announcements from our Warden Kate Bacon and the power of our website/social media with us. I addressed the congregation asking them to like and share the social media advertising vehicle we were using to reach more people who might even be outside of our parish.

As we all started to contribute, ordering also began and the relationships with our vendors were once again reunited. I heard from the soap supplier, “Oh yes. You are the church that orders all the soap”. Our socks supplier was like talking to an old friend, as he now answers his phone with, “Hello All Saints, how have you been”?

As the deliveries started to arrive, parishioner Rob Biddinger took time to meet me at the local UPS freight terminal to help transport the soap. Fr. Sam Vaught met Rob and I at church, as he was juggling his day to pray over and bless all our deliveries. Then after overwhelming the drop off location for Wheeler's downtown location and being pointed to a second location, we distributed 85,000 bars of soap to Wheeler Mission.

Parishioner Dave Kubley took to the horns, put together a press release and contacted all the local media outlets. Our SOS project was picked up the local FOX affiliate thanks to Dave's work, resulting in more awareness in the community. We were interviewed concerning our long-standing SOS campaign as we distributed 15,000 bars of soap and 20,000 pair of socks to The Damien Center and to the Coby Palmer Food Pantry.

You are correct, that is 100,000 bars of soap and 20,000 pairs of socks, for a total of 120,000 items donated for SOS 2021... WOW!

***We have gone from collecting 350 pairs of socks, to touching over 120,000 people with something as simple as a pair of socks or a bar of soap. –Truly I say, “Thanks be to God”!***

Jim Tomlinson