

## CRS Cultivates Global Solidarity in Belleville Diocese

by Cheryl Sommer, CBI Animator in the Diocese of Belleville



Solidarity with one another is truly in the DNA of Catholics in the largely rural Diocese of Belleville, IL. If a neighbor down the road gets cancer, the whole community gets to work on fundraisers to pay for treatment. They jump in with meals, care for the kids, and do whatever is needed to get the family through the crisis. If you tell them that their actions are somewhat amazing, you'll get a comment like, "It's no big deal," "It's what we do."

Through assistance from the CRS Midwest Regional Office and an eventual Capacity Building Grant from CRS in 2017, Catholics in the Belleville Diocese are learning and acting on their Catholic teaching that loving one's neighbor also has a global dimension.

Belleville is a diocese with limited financial resources and a bare bones diocesan staff. On their own, a few parishes offered the JustFaith program. After completing JustFaith, Myrt Rollins from the tiny village of St. Rose contacted the CRS Midwest office to ask for help in increasing global solidarity awareness in the diocese. He put together a group of 7 JustFaith graduates to form a CRS Diocesan Global Solidarity Team, and they met monthly, with the guidance of the CRS Midwest Office.

The efforts of this small group of committed Catholics yielded significant fruits. They were able to elicit the assistance of CRS parish representatives in 35 of the diocese's 108 parishes. Calls by the team to all 108 parishes led to parishes actively promoting CRS Rice Bowl. After just two years of efforts CRS Rice Bowl contributions more than doubled from \$13,433 to \$30,772. CRS Ethical Trade sales also began springing up in 6 parishes by 2016.

Zeal for global solidarity grew in 2017 when the diocese received a 3-year CRS Capacity-Building Grant of \$6000 a year. This enabled them to pay a stipend to Diocesan Solidarity Team member, Cheryl Sommer, to work a few hours weekly to magnify team efforts.

At the urging of CRS staff, Sommer coordinated a three-day listening campaign in the diocese. CRS staff, Rollins, and Sommer conducted 54 one-on-one interviews with priests, diocesan staff, and parishioners in the diocese. The interviews unearthed new interest in global solidarity and established many relationships for future work. One initiative already in progress is that of building on the strong agricultural focus in the diocese. A meeting is planned with farmers and other Catholics to explore the possibility of relationships with farmers in developing countries. This is already happening through the CRS Foods Resource Bank initiative and there are hopes to begin engagement with the CRS Farmer to Farmer program.

The Capacity-Building Grant also gave the diocese a significant amount of assistance from CRS' Headquarters and Midwest Office. With presentations by CRS staff, the Diocesan Global Solidarity Team coordinated two CRS Diocesan Gatherings in 2017.

The gatherings yielded great enthusiasm from participants and by fall of 2017, the number of parishes with CRS Parish Representatives had increased to 54 and 7 new members joined the Diocesan Global Solidarity Team. Participation in CRS Rice Bowl shot up to 73 parishes producing over \$43,000 in contributions. Parish ethical trade sales continued to multiply and initiatives in Catholic schools also sprung up.

Perhaps the most exciting event of all was initiated by Ridgway Parish Representative, Susan Scherrer. She suggested a third CRS gathering in her remote part of the diocese for those who had been unable to attend previous gatherings because of distance. Braving snow-covered roads in January, the Diocesan Solidarity Team prepared and gave all the presentations on their own. The third gathering was quite energizing much to the surprise of some who attended. Karen Cole, CRS Parish Representative for 14 household St. Francis de Sales Parish in Stonefort came out with a feeling of obligation "I thought it was going to be boring," reflected Cole, "but this is really exciting." Cole has now joined the Diocesan Global Solidarity Team and is sharing her joy for the work of global solidarity with parishes who are not yet involved.

Thanks to involvement with JustFaith and CRS' Capacity-Building Initiative, Catholics in the Belleville Diocese are hungry to live out their faith not only through care for each other but also through their solidarity with those far away. No longer is global solidarity a big deal. It's just what Catholics in the Belleville Diocese do!