

Good Friday walk a chance to reflect, support good causes

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Journal Inquirer

VERNON — People from across the region plan to spend Good Friday in support of good causes, with over 100 walkers expected to hit the streets from Rockville to Windsorville to raise money for charity.

The 20-mile walk on April 14 will start off in the Rockville section of Vernon and winds its way through Ellington and East Windsor.

The walk is still going strong after more than 30 years, a credit to many of the longtime volunteers and participants for whom the event has become an irreplaceable part of the broader Easter season.

"It wouldn't feel like Good Friday without walking," said Judie Culy, one of the organizers. "It's this great, unified effort between so many different people. I'm grateful to be a part of it."

According to the Rev. Paul O'Neil, pastor of Rockville United Methodist Church, the walkers' enthusiasm never flags, even when the weather is far from ideal.

The 2016 walk was one of the worst — a cold rainy day, O'Neil recalled.

"But I didn't hear anyone complaining," he said. "People were just getting soaked, and it was probably around 40 degrees, but everyone had smiles on their faces. People were gathering at the end to cheer people on."

Though Rockville United Methodist takes the lead in organizing the event, the walk represents the combined efforts of several faith communities, including Windsorville United Methodist, Ellington Congregational, Crystal Lake United Methodist, Asylum Hill Congregational, Vernon United Methodist, and the Congregational Church of Union.

Similarly, the annual tradition attracts people from dozens of different towns and organizations. Parents walk with their sons and daughters, and families with three

generations of participants are not uncommon. Ages range from young children to nonagenarians.

"When the little kids come in, their parents will have to sit down and rest, and the kids will still be running around," volunteer Don Ross said, laughing. "You see everybody, every walk of life."

Since the distance is substantial, volunteers have built in safety measures to keep track of the walkers and ensure everyone stays hydrated. The walk has several "rest stops," where residents along the route will be distributing water, oranges, and candy, and at Windsorville United Church, volunteers will be handing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. In addition, signs and crossing guards help walkers navigate the route while workers patrol the streets by car, looking for anyone in need of assistance and making sure the walk proceeds smoothly.

Over time, walk veterans catch on to useful tips, like bringing extra socks and drinks.

"The first time I walked, I wasn't fully aware of what I was getting into," longtime participant Barbara Kent said. "You pick up on things year to year."

Regional, national causes supported

Through pledges, walkers raise about \$12,000 annually, which is divided between local and national causes.

This year, one third of proceeds will go to support Cornerstone, the Vernon-based assistance nonprofit that runs a homeless shelter, a soup kitchen, and a clothing bank in the Rockville section of town.

"We're certainly very thankful to be a part of it," shelter director Bryan Flint said. "I view the walk as kind of like the path to Easter. It's a sacrifice."

The other two thirds of funds raised go to Sharing Inc., which supports organizations fighting rural poverty in the Deep South.

The Vernon walkers have been linked to Sharing since the first Good Friday event 33 years ago. Then-pas-



Jared Ramsdell / Journal Inquirer

Participants in the 2016 Good Friday Walk make their way down Grove Street in Vernon. This year's walk will be held April 14.

tor Richard Thompson took his inspiration from Kay Doherty, a Braintree, Massachusetts, resident who started a Good Friday walk in nearby Hingham, Massachusetts, to raise money for a struggling farm co-op in Mississippi. Since then, the Sharing movement founded by Doherty has expanded its focus to various initiatives, especially those aimed at increasing opportunity for young people.

Children in the South, especially children of color, face levels of poverty and racism that are difficult for many in other parts of the country to imagine, Culy said.

"The scale, the magnitude of the need down there is enormous," Flint added.

He said the Sharing-supported programs, which tend to emphasize self-help, leadership, and advancement through education, resonate with his work at Cornerstone.

"You're serving poverty, but how do you break poverty?" he asked rhetorically.

With the gravity of the cause and the holiday in general, walkers see their journey in a spiritual light. While many participants walk in

groups or with friends and relatives, the 20-mile loop also offers the chance for silent thought consistent with the solemnity surrounding Good Friday.

"Because people walk at difference paces, you'll start out with six people, then it will be four of you, and then two of you, and then just you," Kent said. "It's nice to have someone to talk to, but walking alone lends itself to that quiet contemplation."

Flint said the walk reflects the Christian journey to Easter and serves as a reminder of the sacrifices of Jesus.

"None of us are being asked to go through what he went through," Flint said. "It's a chance to reflect on what life means to us."

Walking on Good Friday is a sign of faith and introspection across Christian traditions, O'Neil said. He saw it in Boston, where Catholics would go from church to church for silent reflection, and in Panama, where celebrants of the Feast of the Black Christ make a special pilgrimage, even travelling part of the way on their hands and knees. And in Jerusalem, he said,

thousands of Christians follow the Via Dolorosa — Jesus' path to crucifixion — through the Old City, with vivid reenactments of Christ's last hours.

"It's a sacred day and it's a good day for contemplation," O'Neil said.

In keeping with that philosophy, organizers say they aren't focused on who comes in first or finishes fastest. Their focus is on bringing people together in the service of faith and support.

"Whether you do 20 miles or 1 mile, it doesn't matter," Culy said. "It's the commitment that counts."

Anyone seeking addition information on the Good Friday walk can do so in person at Rockville United Methodist Church at 142 Grove St., or visit the church's website

www.rockumchurch.com and navigate to the Good Friday page.

Registration will take place at the church April 14, starting at 7 a.m., and the walk will begin at 7:30 a.m.

The event takes place rain or shine, but will be called off in the event of a snowstorm, Culy said.