

Postville burnout: Ministry to immigrants

by [Stan Friedman](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

Paul Ouderkirk was on retreat in Dubuque on May 12, 2008, when someone tapped him on the shoulder and asked him why he wasn't 75 miles away in Postville. The Catholic priest did not know that earlier that day, federal authorities had launched the nation's largest ever single-site immigration raid on the Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant in Postville and arrested 389 people. The Spanish-speaking Ouderkirk had served St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Postville—a quiet community of 2,400 people for which he had a special affinity—before retiring. Upon hearing of the government's action, he returned immediately to resume serving as the parish's pastor.

Since then Ouderkirk and the leaders of two other Postville congregations and a 17-member coalition of churches in nearby Decorah have helped meet the needs of the immigrant workers' families as well as those of the replacement employees who were hired before the plant declared bankruptcy and closed in November. The plant had employed about 1,000 people, so its closing sparked an enormous economic crisis in the area. It later reopened on a limited basis, under the management of a court-appointed trustee, with far fewer workers.

Congregations have helped the community in a host of ways, from offering legal services to giving rides for job interviews. Using donations that have come from local residents and around the country, the churches distribute as much as \$80,000 each month to pay for food, rent, utilities, health care and other necessities, Ouderkirk said.

At this point church leaders are exhausted. "I wake up some mornings and think this is madness; I can't go on," Ouderkirk said.

"We're just at a place where we see no end," said Carol Kress, pastor of First United Methodist Church, one of the churches in the Decorah Faith Coalition. "You want good to come from how you help. In some ways, though, we only feel like we're supporting the system that has been unjust."

Steve Brackett, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, adds, "The hardest thing for me has been working with the undocumented immigrants because we've given all the help and assistance knowing they would be leaving. Some of these people have been in our communities for 14 or 15 years."

In addition to helping family members left behind following the raids, the churches have assisted some 40 Guatemalans who were arrested at the plant and served five-month prison sentences. In October, the federal government sent them back to Postville to be witnesses in criminal trials against the Agriprocessors managers charged with violating immigration and labor rules. The churches have paid for their relocation because the government did not provide funds.

A spokesperson for the U.S. attorney told the *Des Moines Register* that the alternative would have been to keep the men in jail as material witnesses. He added that they probably would be deported when the testimony was no longer needed. The men and women who were allowed to stay because of their children must wear ankle-bracelet monitors.

The Decorah Faith Coalition also assisted roughly 20 Palauans whom the company hired legally in the wake of the May 12 arrests. They were forced from their homes November 14 after the plant broke its promise to use money it had deducted from the employees' checks to pay their rent and utilities. Many of the Palauans spent a week living in a building belonging to the Evangelical Covenant Church in Decorah until they could find other work. "These people didn't have anything to put their clothes in," said Donalee Burns, the church's administrative assistant. "They've been carrying their clothes in garbage bags."

Before being sheltered in the church's building—a former bank the congregation plans to remodel for its own use next year—the Palauans were driven the nearly 30 miles from Postville to Decorah, where they spent the night in a local ice rink. "They had no clue where they were going when they got on the bus, and they traveled for so long," said Kress. She recalled what one Palauan told her: "I was so afraid, but when I came around the corner and I saw this table full of food, I knew I was among friends."

In Palau, honor, dignity and respect are values that are held very highly by the community, Kress said. The Palauan worker told her, "Finally, we are with people in America who hold those values true, too." Said Kress: "I wanted to cry."

Church leaders have been awed by the faith of the workers. “We go on because we are seeing the strength of the people who are suffering more than we are,” Ouderkirk said.

Jewish organizations from across the country have sent financial assistance as well as kosher and nonkosher food for the Postville food pantry. “We have really seen a tremendous response from the Jewish community,” reported Brackett. “This has really been an interfaith effort.”

The experience has drawn the local faith communities closer together and strengthened their resolve to seek justice, according to Ouderkirk. “There’s a deeper sense of connection since May 12. We’ve walked together, worked together, prayed together.”

Representatives of the local faith groups now are pressing the government to provide more assistance, including \$700,000 promised by Iowa lieutenant governor Patty Judge when she visited the area late last year. Those funds won’t help some of the people who need it the most, Brackett says. Undocumented former plant employees are ineligible for the aid, and the money is designated only for utility bills and rent.

The lieutenant governor had visited the community in response to a letter the coalition sent November 24 to state and federal representatives, calling on them to coordinate a visit to the area and initiate a government response. The letter stated: “The people of Postville and surrounding communities have responded generously and courageously, but more specialized assistance will be required to face and rise above this crisis.” Brackett said it is appropriate for the government to provide more assistance: “They created this mess.”