

Agency for Change Podcast: Father Mike Eckley, Executive Director at Catholic Charities

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov, that brings you the stories of changemakers, who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lyn Wineman:

Hi everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today's guest, Father Mike Eckley, is the executive director at Catholic Charities and he guides and directs the overall mission of the Catholic Charities organization. I'm eager to talk with you today and learn more about the great impact that you are making on the world. How are you today, Father Mike?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

I'm very good, Lyn. Thank you.

Lyn Wineman:

I'd love to just start our conversation today by hearing more about Catholic Charities. Can you tell me, what does the organization do, who do you serve and what are the overall mission and goals of Catholic Charities?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Sure. Catholic Charities has existed in Omaha and the Archdiocese of Omaha for over 95 years. And over those 95 years, our emphasis has changed. Currently, our agency has six primary programs. One is food insecurity. And so we have currently two food pantries, one that's in southeast Omaha, one is in northeast Omaha. When we get our new building finished, we'll have another pantry kind of midtown north, around 90th and Maple. We do emergency food services there and then also food delivery. We have deliveries to some of the elderly in the community. We work with visiting nurses and a few other agencies for referrals, for elderly who can't get out and we'll deliver pantries. And we're starting to expand that a little bit more with some of our volunteers that are coming on board to do those home deliveries for those who can't get out to receive items.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

We also have domestic violence services, we have a shelter. And then besides just the shelter, which would provide immediate safety for a person experiencing domestic violence, whether that be an adult or adults and children. Then as part of that program, we also help with those next steps in helping a person establish a safety plan for themselves. Also helping them, if they need, to find a job, find an apartment to make those steps away from that violent situation, and to have that safety for themselves and their children, if they have children. Another program that we have is our immigration legal services. And so with refugee and immigrant population, to help them to navigate their way through the immigration process and naturalization process. And so we have people in all levels, helping them, what

those next steps may be, whether it be getting a green card, a student visa, a work visa, all the way to naturalization.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

We have behavioral health services. We are currently in 22 of our Catholic schools in Omaha, high schools and grade schools, and then also the Newman Center at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, providing behavioral health counselors. We also do an outpatient and looking very soon to expand to a parish-based program. And so helping children, individuals, families with those behavioral health services.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Another program we have is family strengthening. We have an elders program. Also, part of that is our Latino resource center and just helping with the different programs to help strengthen families, some experiencing crisis, but also helping them in whatever situation they may find themselves in. And then our other program is micro business and helping entrepreneurs to come up with their business plan marketing. It's an education program. And then we go on with ongoing support for those clients as they open their businesses, quote a number of different workshops to help them grow their business.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

We had this program for about 20 years now in Omaha. And even last year with COVID, were able to open 90 new small businesses for entrepreneurs. With that, we also have a micro loan program, and we'll loan up to \$5,000 for graduates of the micro-business program, and helping them to realize their dream. Overall, Catholic Charities is help those facing crisis, but also to look people up and to help them to experience the inherent dignity that each and every one of them has as a human being and ensure that dignity. And so we see that as the mission of Catholic Charities to help in those moments of crisis, but also to help people to recognize that inherent dignity that they have and to be able to live with dignity.

Lyn Wineman:

That's an amazing group of services. A lot of ways to lift people up. I think I heard you say food insecurity, domestic violence, immigration legal services, behavioral health, family strengthening, and then micro business. And did you say you helped open 90 businesses last year?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Right. Helped entrepreneurs with the classes and the support to open their own businesses. Yes, 90 new businesses were opened.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. That is really amazing. So you also mentioned COVID-19 and the pandemic, and hopefully we're on the ending side of the pandemic right now. But many communities have taken a really hard hit in the past year. Can you tell me more about the positive impact that Catholic Charities has had on the community and what you did to help?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Yes. With the food insecurity with our pantries, in 2019, the year before COVID, even with the flooding that happened in parts of a Nebraska. And we did go out and took our food truck out to some of the rural areas that were experiencing floods and provided some emergency services there, emergency food and services there. In 2019, total we had distributed about 200,000 pounds of food through our pantries.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a lot of food.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

It is a lot of food. In 2020, in the midst of COVID, we distributed 1.4 million pounds of food. So a seven fold increase in the need and in the distribution of food, getting it to those people that were experiencing insecurity and crisis and helping them with that, just that basic need of food. We know that we all need that and to be able to provide that. And we had some great partners that have helped us in that and great volunteers that have been working with our pantries and helping to distribute that food. So making that very positive impact through our two food pantries and our home delivery has been a huge increase. And we know that even though we're coming out of COVID and continue to hope that things head in that positive direction and they seem to be.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

We know that there's still going to be some of those issues. We know that people are still dealing with trying to meet basic needs of shelter and food, and it's not going to subside right away. And so that need is going to continue to be there. Also, we know that from our experience, we know people, during this period of COVID, they've experienced some crisis when it comes to mental health, some dealing with loneliness and isolation, with routines disrupted, with loss of jobs, loss of loved ones, just the sense of unsure. And whether it be children that are adapting to not seeing their classmates each and every day and doing virtual classes and struggling with that sometimes, to other people who had some mental health issues, but the crisis itself just seemed to make that more acute in their lives and seeking that help. Our behavioral health services have seen an uptick in one crisis situations, and then also in that need and trying to meet that need and continuing to do that with, as I said, with individuals, whether they be adults or children, adolescents or families.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. I feel like throughout the pandemic, we've started talking a lot more about behavioral health and mental health needs. And I know from all the news reports that the need for that has increased. And I could see where those two services that you just mentioned, the help with food insecurity and the help with behavioral health, as you talk about lifting basic human dignity. That's really the ground level there in making sure that happens. Father Mike, what other services or programs does Catholic Charities provide?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Well, the domestic violence services that we provide, we have the only dedicated domestic violence shelter in Douglas County. And we've been operating that for about 40 years now. We also have a 24-hour crisis hotline. And one of the things in COVID, that we noticed, especially at the beginning, that service dipped in calls and calls per shelter, which made sense that if the person was stuck in a violent situation and people were home constantly, there wasn't that opportunity to get out or to make a phone call. Once things started to loosen up, we saw a spike in both phone calls and the need for the shelter.

And we continue to provide that. During part of the period of COVID, we did some of that in hotels because of the need for individuals and families to isolate from other individuals and families.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Our shelter is a communal, although they have individual bedrooms. There's the communal space of living room, kitchen, work area or study area for children. But we used hotels during that period of time when we couldn't have people in the shelter. We're back to using the shelter now. If we have a person who does get sick or needs to isolate, we are able to do that. But to provide not only, as I said, that shelter, that safe space for them to be able to just to begin that healing process, but then also to start that planning of what's next for that individual or for their family.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

And whether that be employment, apartment, schooling. We had one woman who was in the shelter last year and just graduated from Metro and is planning on going on to UNO and finishing her degree. We're able to, one: get her safe when she called on us to a safe space. She stayed with us for little over a month with her three sons, minor sons. And now she's in her own apartment, is working and going to school, providing that safe and hopeful future, not only for herself, but for her three boys.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a great story to share and a great example of really making a difference. One of the things we like to say here at KidGlov is that we're the people helping the people who are changing the world. And for Catholic Charities, how would you say that you're changing the world for the people and the communities that you serve?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

I believe that, and I've seen it with this individual that I just mentioned and so many others, that when we bring hope to an individual who may be feeling like they're in a hopeless situation and bring that hope and that little bit of support. One thing that we find is once a person finds that little bit of support and a little bit of help, they recognize they have a lot of internal strength to be able to make that next step. With that support and help that we can provide and that encouragement and that hope, and it transforms them. And like with this particular individual, it has an impact on her sons' lives and what their possibilities and opportunities are going to be moving forward, to see a different way, to see the possibilities that are there.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Working with our micro-business program, and as I mentioned, last year, even in the midst of COVID, 90 entrepreneurs were able to open their own businesses, providing not only employment for themselves and a future for themselves, but 180 total jobs. So employing other people. But when a person has that dream, and I come from a family of entrepreneurs, and the group of friends that I grew up with and went to grade school, high school with, still friends with a group of guys, a number of them were entrepreneurs. They have opened their own businesses.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

And I see that when a person's able to do that, to realize their dream and to have that independence, that has that impact on their family, that they're supporting and they're providing for. But also in the

community, they have an impact as others see that someone is able to do this and able to fulfill the dreams that they had. And it brings that positive hope to the community. We also know that people who have small businesses and communities invest in the communities they're part of because they want to see the community do well, because when they do well, their business does well. And so they're very involved in their communities and making a difference.

Lyn Wineman:

If people could see me right now, which they can't because we're on a podcast, you would see me shaking my head, because I have that story that when you follow your dreams and spark that passion, it really is life changing. Everything you've talked about here is going to impact lives for generations to come. And it's such a broad and impactful body of work. So Father Mike, I understand that Catholic Charities might have an upcoming event that we should know about.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Yes. On July 2, Friday, July 2, we're going to have Essential Fest and really excited about this. We did an Essential Fest last year, was our first one, and we did it virtually. And it was a way to get our message of Catholic Charities out to a broader community, and also a way to help support some of the local artists. It was a virtual event that was held at the Slowdown in downtown Omaha. But unfortunately, the only ones that could be there was the MC and myself and our tech crew that was there filming and the bands that came in and played. But it's a way of just celebrating. This year, it's the kickoff to the 4th of July weekend. And we're going to be SumTur Amphitheater in Papillion. The gates are going to open at three o'clock and there's going to be things for people of all ages.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

For the kids, we're going to have fire trucks there. There's going to be cheerleaders, there's going to be face painting. Also, The String Beans, which our band, a musical group that appeals to young people. We're going to have a Cirque du Soleil clown doing a children's workshop. That'll be going on. There's going to be food and drink. And a number of the food is going to be provided by some of the food trucks that got their start through Catholic Charities' micro business, will be there on hand selling their great food. There's going to be, on the main stage, we're going to have Oye Como Va, which is a local Santana tribute band, The Emmett Bower Band and Finest Hour.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

And we're going to conclude night about 10 or 10:30 with fireworks, done by Bellino Fireworks. So professional fireworks display that night. The community event that usually happens that same time of the year at Memorial Park in Omaha has been postponed. I believe they pushed that off until August. And so this will be a great way to start the 4th of July weekend for a family event. And people can go to essentialfest.org or CComaha.org for more information and tickets for that day.

Lyn Wineman:

That sounds fabulous. A lot of fun. I've heard The String Beans before, and some of those other bands, very fun, and all for a good cause supporting all of these different things that Catholic Charities does. That sounds like a great time and a great way to kick off the 4th of July weekend. So it's on the 2 of July. And you said starting at 3 p.m. in SumTur Amphitheater, correct?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Correct. Yes.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. I'd like to switch gears a bit here, Father Mike. You run a very diverse organization. I'd like to hear a bit more about you and your journey to becoming the executive director of Catholic Charities.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Sure. I am a priest of the Archdiocese of Omaha and I was ordained 30 years ago. And my ministry has been diverse over the years. I've been mostly a parish priest, and so started off as an associate pastor in a few different places for six years. And then for the next 21 years was a pastor, both in the rural part of our diocese and in Omaha. For much of that, for both as an associate and as pastor, I also taught high school. So I taught in three different high schools. Archbishop Bergan in Fremont twice, West Point Central Catholic in West Point and Norfolk Catholic High School in Norfolk. Did some coaching also during that time, spent a short time as director of our diaconate program in the rural area.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

My last assignment, prior to my current one, I was pastor of St. Pius X for seven years in Omaha. And for the last three years, I've been servant minister of the archdiocese, which is a position our diocese has, which is unique in that my ministry is to my brother priest. Seven years ago, I was asked to be part of the Catholic Charities board of directors and served on that for six years. And in the midst of some turnover at Catholic Charities and the executive director position coming open was asked by the board and given permission by the Archbishop of Omaha to fill that position as executive director.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

And so I've been doing that for a little over a year, along with my responsibilities as servant minister of the diocese. Fortunately, with the agency being diverse, and we have about 60 employees total, and each one of our program areas have a director and I have three excellent vice presidents that take care of the day-to-day things that are essential to keep everything running and the six directors who direct different programs do an incredible job. Them and their teams are an incredible group of people.

Lyn Wineman:

Great leaders, I get to talk to a lot of great leaders, and I have always noticed that they think and have gratitude for their teams. And, and I can't imagine that an organization that's this diverse doing this much work, you must have a fantastic team. And you have a very interesting background. I understand that you have met some notable people along your journey. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

When I was in grade school, I grew up in the neighborhood of Our Lady of Lourdes parish, which is where my family attended, where I went to grade school and which is right by Hanscom Park. And as you know, right at the edge of Hanscom Park is the Gerald Ford birthplace. When I was about nine years old, President Ford came, towards the end of his term, to dedicate the place. And then shortly after his presidency was finished, it wasn't quite finished when he was still president, came back again and both times was able to see him and shake his hand. I was about nine years old at the time when he came. And about a year later at our school, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Saint Theresa now in the Church of Calcutta,

was in Omaha to receive the Boys Town award. And in that day, she went and visited some of the grade schools and our grade school was one of the ones that she visited, and had the opportunity as a class to meet her and to visit with her a little bit.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow. A sitting president twice and Mother Teresa. I would say those are some notable encounters that you've had. So Father Mike as a leader that does really important work, what advice do you have for other leaders who want to make a difference in their communities?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

One of the things that's very important is to survey the needs in the community. What is the greatest need? And the only way that we can do that is by talking to the people that we serve and that we desire to serve and to find out what their greatest concerns are, what their greatest needs are, and then finding ways that we can work together to meet those needs. And looking for other partners in the community. One thing about Omaha is there's many great nonprofits. Sometimes we're duplicating work. So finding ways that we can work together to meet those needs, not to just duplicate something but to find who's doing the best at something, partnering with them and to work with them. And as I mentioned before, having a great group of people to work with, both our staff and our volunteers, and to continue to encourage them. As you had mentioned, one of the things that I learned very early on when I was in the parish, when I was in the schools and now Catholic Charities is you can never say thank you enough. We're not able to do this without a great staff, without great volunteers and without generous people in the community who enable this to happen each and every day.

Lyn Wineman:

You said so many great things, but I'm going to agree, first of all, in saying that I think the community of Omaha is extremely generous with great nonprofits and a great business community that collaborate and work together. But I heard you say in your advice, I heard you say, talk to people and find out what they need, find ways to work together and partner, get together with great people and then also to express gratitude to those who serve and volunteer and collaborate. All really great advice. So I also like to say that leaders are learners, and I know I love books and podcasts and blogs. I'm curious, Father Mike, do you have any books, podcasts, blogs that you'd like to recommend that have been helpful to you?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Most of what I read is a lot of things more online, not so much podcasts or books, but being part of mail lists with other nonprofits here in the State of Nebraska. And also with being on the mailing list with other executive directors of Catholic Charities throughout the United States and ensuring some best resources, being able to throw out a question of something we may not have a lot of experience with that know that there's a lot of experience either in other Catholic Charities, agencies or in other non-profits in Omaha or throughout Nebraska who have dealt with these things and to learn from them has been one of the things that I've really relied on in this past year to help me to learn and get some good advice and some good direction when I'm not sure which way to go.

Lyn Wineman:

That is a great point. We don't have to reinvent the wheel. There are others out there that can help us so that we can learn from that have paved the way. And in turn, I'm sure that you also are sharing

information that helps others throughout the country and throughout the community as well. Father Mike, I'm also inspired by motivational quotes, and I'm just really curious, I get to talk to a lot of really smart and inspiring people like yourself. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

One of the quotes that, ever since I was young and it has come up a number of times since then is from being a Gross High School graduate. Dux Esto, which was the motto of Gross Catholic High School, which is "be a leader," is one that I'm reminded of and have been reminded of recently and has been on my mind quite a bit recently.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a great one. And you gave us the Latin version of it as well. I've never had anybody give me their quote in Latin too. So thank you for that.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

That's where you see it mostly, on shirts, Gross High School shirts are in the school. It's written in the Latin, but learned very early on what it means and the expectation of being a leader in whatever area that you're in.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. And I'm sure our friends at Gross High School will love the fact that you have mentioned them as well. Always like to give them a shout out. So for our listeners who would like to learn more about Catholic Charities, maybe volunteer, help out, seek services, provide a donation, how can they find more information?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

They can find more information on the web at CComaha.org.

Lyn Wineman:

Okay. CComaha.org. And I think you had mentioned earlier, that's where they'll find information about the event that that's on July 2 as well.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

Yes, there's a link. But they could also go to essentialfest.org and that'll take you directly to the event. But there is information on the CComaha.org site also.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic. So Father Mike, as we wrap up our time together today, what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing?

Fr. Mike Eckley:

The most important thing about Catholic Charities and what we're doing, what we've been doing, especially this past year in the midst of COVID, but what we've been doing for 95 years, is we're

empowering human dignity and enabling people, whether that be a little bit of help in a crisis situation or emergency situation or a little bit of help in direction and helping them realize their dream, or helping them to recognize that innate human dignity that each and every person has.

Lyn Wineman:

That's wonderful. I really appreciate you taking time out today. I know you have a very busy schedule. I congratulate you on the work that you're doing and thank you for the work that you're doing in our community. Have a great day.

Fr. Mike Eckley:

You too. Thank you, Lyn.

Announcer:

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