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A new way of giving

Mary Ann McGivern | Dec. 11, 2013 NCR Today

I received an email from Karen House Catholic Worker [1] in St. Louis with new Christmas giving guidelines. They write: ?We won?t be taking any donations of toys or gifts.? Instead they are asking for bus tickets and money to meet the moms? requests for gifts and gift cards to a local children?s store, Circle of Knowledge, or money for the moms to shop there.

In the early days, when I lived at Karen House, sometimes I imagined coming down in the morning and not being able to get into the hallway for the stacked donations. We always unwrapped Christmas gift donations so the mothers could choose for their children and we took neighbors? names and held a give-away in our dining room in mid-December. Chaos ensued.

Chaos has its own blessings. One very cold day, when we let people line up along our hallway to choose toys, someone opened the clothing room to share what is always a super-abundance of clothes. Then a van pulled up unannounced with three dozen boxes of food collected for some other agency but not needed there in some snafu. Some people gave up their place in line to carry food home. Others stayed for the toys.

And then another van pulled up with lovely items given by residents of a retirement community that we put out right then for the grown-ups to take. Someone handed me a bag of dishes. A woman behind me said she didn?t have any dishes. I turned and handed them to her. Turns out an hour later they were Haviland china. I?ve always treasured my own vision of a family eating off good china and some peace coming to that dinner table from the beauty it is set with.

Be that as it may, by Christmas, the community was exhausted and the guests continued in the same model of chaos they had known all their lives.

So the Worker Community is determined to do things differently and help families create new customs, choosing new gifts from limited resources and limited choice instead of selecting among a lot of donated toys and clothes that have been chosen by others. It?s a choice to meet the guests? needs and not try to meet the needs of donors or neighbors, a choice that?s been a long time coming. Karen House will continue to redistribute donations most of the year, just not at Christmas.

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Links:
[1] http://www.karenhousecw.org/