

Jonesboro parish program there for city's pregnant mothers

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



In March 2020, for the 25th anniversary of *Evangelium vitae*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops called on parishes across the country to join a nationwide effort called “Walking with Moms in Need.”

Originally only intended to last for a year to develop educational, pastoral and action-oriented resources for parishes, the program, designed to help pregnant mothers and families in need, took off.

Two years ago, Blessed Sacrament Church in Jonesboro answered the USCCB’s call.

Martha Bartels leads the parish’s “Moms in Need” program with a small group of women.

“After the Supreme Court decision reversing *Roe v. Wade*, I got a newsletter from the diocese,” Bartels said. “It was Respect Life Month, and there was an article in that newsletter...about building a culture of life and what we can do in a post-Roe world. ... So we discussed as a group, ‘What do we want to do? How can we help?’”

Bartels and other parishioners met with pastor Msgr. Scott Friend and Catherine Phillips, director of the Respect Life Office for the Diocese of Little Rock.

“We decided we wanted to have a dedicated phone line at Blessed Sacrament for someone who

found themselves unexpectedly pregnant to call,” Bartels said. “We’re a small group, so we were worried about biting off more than we could chew, and we didn’t feel like we were educated enough — that we needed some kind of training.”

Phillips provided the group with educational resources and trainings to pursue.

“After we did that course, we felt like we were more equipped to handle a call if we got one from someone who was in a crisis situation or unexpectedly pregnant,” Bartels said.

Bartels and the other members of the Moms in Need program began to search across Jonesboro for available resources. They called Holy Angels Convent and were directed to the pregnancy center in Jonesboro, which was established by St. Bernards Medical Clinic. Moms in Need established connections at the pregnancy center, with the diocese and with the St. Vincent de Paul Society, as well as other organizations with similar goals.

Sister Johanna Marie Melnyk, OSB, vice president for mission and ethics at St. Bernards Healthcare, said a parish group like Moms in Need can play a pivotal role in bridging the services gap.

“I’ve enjoyed connecting with Blessed Sacrament’s Moms in Need group and hope we can continue to build on that,” she said. “St. Bernards Healthcare provides a variety of services for moms, babies and families, but a parish organization can be a vital link in connecting people to the services they need. I feel that Moms in Need really wants to provide that personal connection.”

Shortly after, the group designed a brochure with a list of resources and information. They have since been working to put the word out about their hotline and the work they do, keeping an ad in the weekly parish bulletin.

However, the program is eager to expand beyond the parish walls. With Msgr. Friend’s blessing and encouragement, Bartels said the program is getting ready to reach out to the Jonesboro community.

“We plan on trying to get the word out more,” Bartels said. “We’re such a small group of five people that we thought we just need to do our own parish; we’ll start with that. We rotate taking the phone and taking calls. And since we haven’t had many yet, our plan is to try to get the word beyond our parish and see if there’s a need in the community for something like this. We’re going to put information in the hands of the area high schools and with St. John Newman University Parish at ASU and see if we get any calls from that.”

Bartels said if someone calls the hotline, the most important thing Moms in Need can do is listen.

“The first thing you have to do is listen and truly hear what’s on their heart,” she said. “They might be considering abortion. They might be considering adoption. They might want to keep their baby. So our job is just to listen and to build their trust by hearing what’s on their heart. And at that point, once we’ve established that trust and think that we understand what they are feeling and what they want, then we can go in and possibly share with them some information that we know.”

Donna Fincher is another member of the Moms in Need program. Her uncle, the late Father

Ernie Hardesty, a longtime campus minister, played a pivotal role in forming her pro-life values.

"I just feel closer to him when I do things like that," she said.

Fincher led the Moms in Need program when it was originally formed, working to get women's groups throughout the parish and surrounding community connected to their work.

Fincher said that another large reason for her involvement in the Moms in Need program was her own daughter's unexpected pregnancy.

"My daughter found herself in this situation suddenly at 17 years old, needing someone to go to because she found herself pregnant and she had a lot of goals for herself," she said. "... She was about to go to Notre Dame. She had scholarships anywhere she wanted to go. And so I know the fear that she had, I know how powerless she felt. And she did have a very supportive group of family and friends behind her. But I feel for those who don't — for those who need someone to talk to, to just walk with, to learn the resources that our community has."

Fincher's daughter is now 33. She and her 16-year-old son are now doing well, thanks to the support that they received from the community.

"A lot of things are changing in your life when you find out that you're suddenly pregnant," Fincher said. "... Just reaching out can mean helping people get through those first initial feelings."

Fincher said more parishes should be involved in efforts like this.

"I think that your parish is sometimes the first call that you're going to make," she said. "If you don't have a family member or close friend, you might call your church. That's the first thing I think of when I feel hopeless about something."

Need help?

Would you or someone you know in the Jonesboro area like to speak to the Moms in Need program at Blessed Sacrament Church? Call (870) 926-8377. All calls are confidential.

Need healing after abortion?

Project Rachel is a post-abortion healing ministry of the Catholic Church, provided in the Diocese of Little Rock through the Respect Life Office. Project Rachel reaches out to women, men and their families with spiritual, psychological and emotional support. Women and men are invited to receive the healing grace of God through sacramental reconciliation, counseling and prayer.

Project Rachel has healing support groups and retreats in English and Spanish, and it respects and maintains the confidentiality of all participants.

For more information, call or text (501) 663-0996 or email projectrachel@dolr.org.