

Churches give help with utilities

By **ALBERT LIN**
Russell County News

In the past, individual churches in Russell had programs through which they could provide emergency financial assistance to local families which need help with paying utility bills. Recently, the local churches have started working together to provide this assistance.

Pastor Roger Dennis of St. John Lutheran Church is the contact person for this unified program, which is being conducted through the Russell Association of Churches. Dennis was the featured speaker during the Russell Rotary Club's Nov. 22 meeting.

The RAOC has long had programs which have provided emergency food and motor fuel to transients who travel through Russell. Also, the RAOC assists the Russell County Food Pantry.

Pastor Dennis said, when Russell's First Baptist Church closed, that church donated some funds to the Russell County Area Community Foundation. That money was to be used to benefit the Russell community.

The idea arose to use the money as the basis for a unified utilities assistance program supported by Russell's churches, in order to avoid duplication of efforts.

Dennis said the utilities assistance program is intended to help needy families receive a "help-out" not a "hand-out."

When a family representative contacts Pastor Dennis for help paying utilities, Pastor Dennis requests he or she bring the family's bills and other financial records, so the family's financial situation and financial

resources can be studied.

Dennis said, when the RAOC is considering providing utilities assistance to a family, a major factor is whether the family needs the assistance just this once, to get by until the family's financial situation is predicted to become viable again.

The RAOC program does not have the financial resources to provide utilities assistance to families whose financial situation will not improve for a significant time. For such families, the RAOC may be able to arrange other help, such as assisting a needy family to move in with relatives.

If the RAOC decides to provide utilities assistance, the payment is made directly to the utility provider. No cash or checks are given to families.

Dennis said the RAOC usually provides a family with utilities assistance

just once a year, except when the family has paid back all of their earlier assistance.

The RAOC always welcomes community donations to help the utilities assistance fund.

At the time Pastor Dennis spoke, he said the RAOC has, so far this year, assisted 83 families with the payment of utilities. So far this year, the RAOC has provided a total of slightly more than \$8,000 in utilities assis-

tance, of which about \$2,300 has been paid back.

Dennis noted, because of the current economic downturn, a significant number of families seek-

ing assistance are those whose wage-earners used to make high salaries, but the wage-earners have lost their jobs and have exhausted all other financial resources.



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