

Poor find wealth of food and friendliness at mission

By Kate Parry
Staff Writer

The city's poor began to line up at the Rev. Paul Artopoulos' doors at 9 a.m. Wednesday — even though word had gone out long before that those doors in a former synagogue on the north side weren't going to open before noon.

But these were people accustomed to waiting. By noon there were thousands lined up around the Disciples Ministry building and down two blocks, testimony that poverty knows no race or age.

By 3 p.m., 5,000 would walk away with all the food they could carry — bags of bread, produce, meat, canned goods, soup frozen into donated milk cartons. Nothing fancy. Just good plain food handed to them by Artopoulos and 25 volunteers.

"Merry Christmas," said the volunteer at the door, and a woman tucked a toddler ahead while she reached for a bag.

"Merry Christmas," and a brawny man mumbled "Thank you" and hung his head.

"Merry Christmas," and a old wom-

an cringed and hid her face from the glare of a television camera recording her station in life for the evening news.

Bounding through this sea of grocery bags was Artopoulos, a man who gently spreads his gospel message between food and donated hats. Oh, he gets it in all right — prints it on the cartons of frozen soup, which are his latest innovation in feeding the poor. But he does it delicately.

Christmas charity is nothing new. What is new about Artopoulos and crew is that the giving goes on all year round — from trucks he pulls

up to street corners and from the kitchen in his mission, the largest in the state, a place he calls "the Hotel Soffel of the poor."

Artopoulos, 54, a native South Dakotan and former alcoholic who came "out of the Assembly of God" denomination, started a nondenominational ministry for born-again Christians in 1974. He started the mission seven years ago and the food giveaways four years ago. He does "a lot of begging" and "God just brings it in," he said.

Yesterday, God brought in sweet potatoes, meat, celery, cranberries,

bread, canned goods, homemade soups and stews and pineapples.

It was the pineapples that gave Artopoulos pause. "God brought them here, to Minnesota. Just think about it. X-marked for these people."

Like much of the food, they were donated by a local food distributor. Food corporations and individuals contribute plenty. That's the way it should be, he says, because "the rich get rich off the poor."

The line moved slowly past the tables of groceries.

"Merry Christmas," and two young women helped each other pick up the bulging bags.

"Merry Christmas," and an old fellow who seemed unsure of where he was suddenly felt a bag land in his arms. He made the connection and his eyes lit up. He smiled at the volunteer.

Artopoulos watched the scene, obviously satisfied with what he'd wrought. "The gospel message is pretty shallow without practical outreach," he said.