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By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Thanksgiving itself won't happen until a week from today, but the Liberal Ministerial Alliance hopes to help get people in the spirit with a community service at 6 p.m. Sunday. Saint Anthony Catholic Church at 1510 N. Calhoun Ave. will host the event.

"We're excited about this event, very much so," said Fr. Jim Dieker. With help from other churches in Liberal, St. Anthony parish has planned a service with something for everyone.

"The minister from New Harvest Church, Ollie Kinser, will be the preacher. Several others will be helping, from various churches, to proclaim scripture and prayer. Our parish will be providing the music."



Dieker said last year's service, hosted by Bibleway Church of God in Christ, provided an uplifting and inspiring example of how music can bring people together.

“Of course, they provided music in the African-American gospel tradition, and that enlivened the experience for all of us,” Dieker said. “Our parish has a Spanish-speaking choir, so several songs may be in Spanish, although most of the service and music will be mainly in English.”

Cultural and language differences are minor in the face of historic doctrinal differences between churches, which go back hundreds of years. Still, Dieker said the congregations in Liberal are fortunate to find common ground each year through events sponsored by the Ministerial Alliance.

“It’s very interesting that Thanksgiving is a holiday so broadly accepted,” he said, noting that nobody seems to argue about the date for celebration or the proper way to do so. “It did not begin as a church holy day. It’s more of a pure holiday so it gives us that opportunity to worship together. All our churches are coming very easily together.”

Dieker said he’s encouraged to see churches work together, because it means people are coming together.

“Maybe we eat a meal together, or we work together, or we pray together. These are the most human activities, and that kind of brings the individual face to face, into a relationship. It helps in building the spirit of community,” he said.

His point of view reflects the position promoted by the Catholic church’s new leader, Pope Francis.

“He has addressed this idea in the wider church — that we can’t be navel-gazers,” Dieker said with a laugh. “We are sent out to be part of the world, to transform the world by seeking unity and fellowship.”

In doing so, the ultimate goal is to tie neighborliness and friendship to “something that is deeper, spiritually tied to salvation,” Dieker said. Thanksgiving, he mused, is the ideal time to begin.

“Our relationship with God starts with thanksgiving. Salvation flows from recognizing the grace He offers us, a gift that we must be open to receive,” Dieker said. “There’s an element there that is crucial, which is a thankful heart.”

Dieker said gratitude looks different in every life, just as the Ministerial Alliance’s annual service changes slightly each year as it migrates from church to church. That’s the beauty of ecumenical efforts, he said — learning to appreciate differences while celebrating the common ground of belief. All the rest, is just minor details.



For example, in Dieker’s majority-Hispanic parish, Thanksgiving is celebrated with a distinctly south-of-the-border twist.

“It isn’t turkey,” that people anticipate Dieker said, though he added, “people are trying to somehow embrace turkey.” What do his Hispanic parishioners really love?

He grinned: “Tamales.”

The Liberal Ministerial Alliance community Thanksgiving service will be at 6 p.m. Sunday at St. Anthony Church at the intersection of Calhoun Ave. and Fifteenth Street. The public is invited to attend.

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